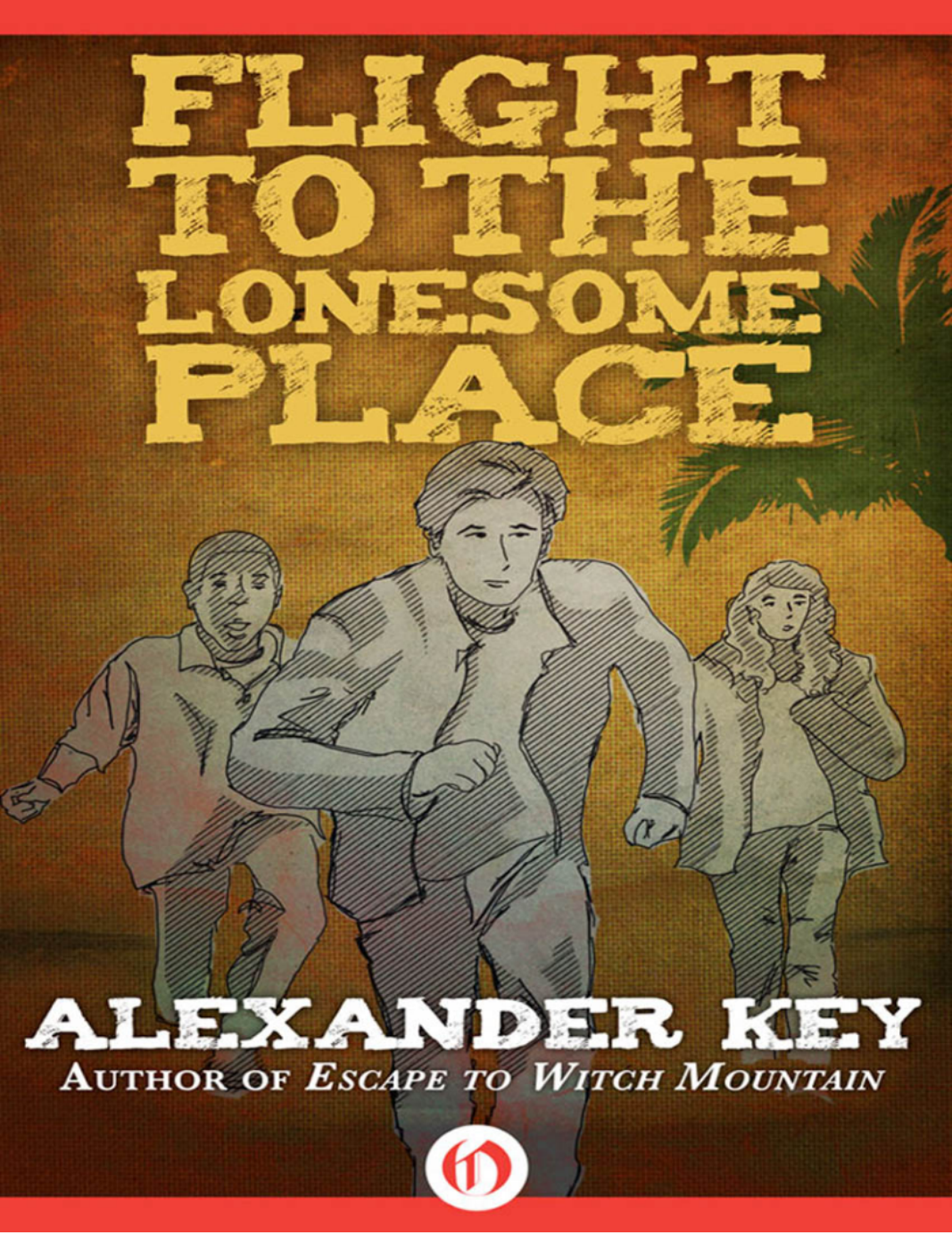
FLIGHT TO THE LONESOME PLACE



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Flight to the Lonesome Place

Alexander Key

This book is for
Kit and Carlotta

"What's magic? Nothing but the ability to do something everybody knows is impossible … Only, my dear little witch, just remember that *nothing* is impossible."

—*Marlowe to Ana María Rosalita*

1
RUN FOR YOUR LIFE

RONNIE BEGAN HIS PERFORMANCE at the Regency that evening with hardly a thought that it might be his last public appearance. His day had started badly, and he had been haunted since breakfast by the fear that something—something he didn't want to think about—was very wrong in his life. But at curtain time, as usual, all his worries vanished on the instant. Curtain time was a magical moment when everything unpleasant ceased to exist. It was the time when he turned into a prince and stepped forth into a glittering world of smiling faces, all belonging to his friends.

And they were his friends. They loved him. There was never any doubt of it, whether the city was London, New York, or any of a dozen other places. There wasn't the least doubt of it tonight in New Orleans when Jerry Dunn, the Regency's master of ceremonies, announced in the microphone, "Here he comes, folks! Get your questions ready. Ah, here he is, the wonder of the age—Ronnie Cleveland, the incredible Blue Boy!"

The instant applause that greeted him was deafening. And the warmth of it washed away the last shreds of the day's darkness. He ran forth, a small, slender figure in blue—his shimmering blue suit was exactly the same color as his mop of curly blue hair—and cried happily, "Hello, everybody! Hello, hello! … Thank you … Thank you …"

He began on the piano, giving the suddenly breathless room a rollicking rendition of a favorite tune, then broke off in the middle of it and asked, "Questions? Questions? Who has a question I can't answer?" Smiling, he pointed to a tall paper cap on the piano. "Who'll make me wear the dunce cap?"

Scores of well-dressed diners wanted to match wits with him, and Jerry Dunn hurried toward the nearest with the microphone. On the right a tiny girl, seated between a bronzed man with white hair, and a handsome black-haired woman, stood up and waved her hand frantically, but the master of ceremonies did not see her. Ronnie could not help noticing her, for she was the only very young person in sight. There was something foreign about her, and she seemed entirely out of place among so many oldsters.

Then his attention went to Jerry Dunn, who had stopped at a crowded table dominated by a plump, bald-headed man. It was an obviously wealthy group.

"We're more interested in numbers," said the bald man. "We've heard the Blue Boy can handle them like a computer, and that he never forgets. So we have a little test for him. Each of us here has a list of numbers, big ones. We'll take turns calling them out, one at a time. When we finish, we'd like to see if he can instantly give the total for each group of numbers, the total for all the groups, and then repeat every number and point out the person who called it."

"Wow!" Jerry Dunn exclaimed. "What d'yuh think he is—a genius?" When the laughter had died, he glanced back at Ronnie and said, "That sounds like a rather tall order. How about it, Blue Boy?"

Ronnie rolled his eyes and reached for the dunce cap. He started to put it on, then hesitated. It was the sort of test that, to his audience, must seem beyond the powers of any human being. But he had solved hundreds of problems that were far more complicated.

"If I do it correctly," he called to the bald man, "how much will you donate to the state home for boys?"

"Will a thousand dollars suit you?"

"That won't go far in a state home," Ronnie reminded him.

There was a quick consultation at the table. Then the bald man said, "We'll make it ten thousand."

"It's a deal!" Ronnie cried. "Let's have the numbers."

He astonished them all with the ease and speed by which he won the donation. The applause was tremendous. His nimble fingers raced over the piano keys for a minute, then again he asked for questions.

Now Jerry Dunn became busy carrying the microphone from table to table. Questions poured forth: What's a trapezium? a quagga? a pyx? Could he name the owners of Bucephalus and Traveller, and tell how many years apart they lived? …

Ronnie had no trouble until the circling microphone reached the tiny girl who had been trying all the while to gain attention. He had decided she was Spanish, as was the dark-haired woman with her. Her almost doll-like smallness made it hard to guess her age.

"I have several very important questions," she began, in a high clear voice. "First—"

"Just a moment, please," Jerry Dunn interrupted. "It isn't often that we find young people like you at the Regency. Would you mind telling us your name and age, and a little about yourself?"

"I am Ana María Rosalita Montoya de la Torre," she replied, her manner as grand as a duchess. "I am not very old, but a lady's age is a private matter, and you shouldn't ask about it. I am traveling with the Señora Bretón—she speaks no English, thank goodness—and the

gentleman with us is Captain Anders, of the *Cristobal Colón*, the ship we are sailing on early in the morning, as soon as it is loaded. That is enough about me—"

"Not quite," the master of ceremonies insisted. "You haven't told us where you are from, Ana María."

"I am called Ana María Rosalita, if you please," she said firmly. "And I am *from* Santo Domingo—though I am *not* going back, in spite of what some people think." Turning, she looked directly at Ronnie with curiously intent eyes that made him think of big black marbles. "Boy Blue, do you ever seek advice from—from *hechiceras?"*

He blinked at her, and she hastened to add, "You speak Spanish, do you not, and know what one is?"

"*Sí, señorita*," he replied, recalling his vocabulary. "It is a maker of spells, a sorceress."

"And surely you believe in spells and magic, do you not?"

Again he was startled. But he remembered his audience, and smiled quickly and said, "Why, I couldn't possibly do without them! How do you think I'm able to answer all the crazy questions folks ask me? It takes *lots* of magic, believe me!"

There was laughter, but his small questioner ignored it. Nor did she pay any attention to the Señora Bretón, who was tugging at her worriedly, trying to make her sit down.

"If magic is part of your life," she said, "then I do not have to warn you. Your *hechicera* must have told you already. But please be careful, Boy Blue. Be very, *very* careful!"

Ronnie thanked her in his best Spanish for her warning, gave her a fine bow, then tried to forget her so he could get on with his performance. The applause helped, as it always did, and the final thunder of applause when he finished was enough to assure him that he had put in a good evening. It was thunderous enough, in fact, to give him a heady feeling that stayed with him for some time after he reached his dressing room. He was not immediately aware that no guard was on duty to protect him.

He changed from his blue silk suit to an ordinary brown one, drew a brown wig over his shock of blue curls, and put on a pair of heavy, horn-rimmed glasses. Thus disguised—it was mainly to escape the mobs of autograph hunters who hounded him everywhere—he slipped back through the hotel lobby to the elevators. Several people glanced at him curiously, but no one immediately realized that the pale, thin features under the glasses belonged to a face that had become familiar in nearly every country on earth.

It was not until he was in the elevator that he thought again of the tiny Spanish girl. He caught his breath, feeling delayed shock.

Something was wrong, surely, and she had tried to warn him, but how had *she* known about it?

Ronnie's heady feeling evaporated. His spirits sank as the elevator rose. By the time he stepped out at the tenth floor, all the vague fears that had haunted him earlier were back again, stronger than ever.

Suddenly he wished he had help. But where could he find it? Who was the person he could talk to, and trust?

He clenched his small hands and started unhappily down the long, empty corridor. The very emptiness of the place, at that moment, reminded him how alone and friendless he actually was. Being Ronnie Cleveland, the Blue Boy, made up for a great deal. But it wasn't everything. Other kids had homes and families, and friends and relatives they could count on. He had only the Corporation. It practically owned him. And there wasn't a soul in the whole outfit he could look upon as a friend. Not even Gus Woolman, his manager, or Peter Pushkin, his new tutor.

He paused a moment, recalling now that there had been no one on guard duty at his dressing room. Suddenly he wondered why not even Peter Pushkin had been there waiting for him. It didn't matter, really, except that Gus had made it clear that a tutor's duty, among other things, was to act as one of the personal bodyguards. The main one, actually.

"What you gotta remember," Gus had told Peter, "is that Ronnie is a mighty valuable piece of property. You must never let him out of your sight. You're to travel with him, stay in the same hotel suite with him, eat every meal with him. Understand?"

Peter Pushkin, a bushy-haired young college teacher with something too icy in his eyes for comfort, had nodded slowly while he fingered an atrocious red goatee. "I understand," he had said. "Naturally, someone should always be with him just to protect him from the public. That's obvious. But you sound as if there could be trouble from other sources. Are you afraid of kidnappers? Do you think he's in danger?"

"Aw, naw, nothing like that," Gus had replied, almost too quickly. "Anyhow, he's got two regular bodyguards, so only a fool would bother the Blue Boy. But kooks are everywhere. Your job, besides teaching him, is to keep your eyes open. You gotta be sort of a big brother to him, see?"

Cold-eyed Peter Pushkin wasn't quite the kind of big brother Ronnie had hoped for, but he had never been lucky with his tutors. And he was certain now that Gus hadn't told Peter the whole truth.

But why? Where was the danger? When had it started?

Suddenly he realized that all the wrongness in his life had really begun back at the reformatory, on the day Gus had discovered him.

Sharply in his mind rose a vision of the hated place, so jammed with boys that half of them had to sleep on the floor. He didn't belong in the reformatory, for his only crime was being homeless. But there had been no other spot to put him. Gus had said, "I can use your memory, so I'll get you out of this hole. But you gotta do exactly as we tell you. That clear?"

Getting out, and going to live in big Gus Woolman's plush apartment, was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to him. And all he had to do in payment was memorize the accounts Gus and his partner gave him. There was nothing to it.

He might still be acting as their secret bookkeeper if Gus hadn't discovered he had other abilities. There was the piano, which he speedily learned to play by listening to records, and following that was the excitement in school when it was found he could solve intricate mathematical problems in less time than a machine.

The astounded Gus had said, "It's time we dropped those accounts. They're playing out anyway. The kid gives me a new idea. Put him in a blue suit, give those cottony curls a blue rinse to doll 'im up, then try 'im out with his brains and music at one of the clubs. If he goes, we'll hire a writer and a coach, and hit the big spots. What d'you say, Wally?"

Wally Gramm, a thin, quiet man, had nodded slowly. "He'll make it. He's one in a billion. But just to play it safe, let's have papers drawn up, and form a company to handle him."

"Yeah," said Gus. "We gotta protect our investment."

Their investment, Ronnie knew, had been protected beyond their wildest dreams. Nor did they ever again bother with anything requiring memorized records. To the Corporation, the Blue Boy was worth a hundred times as much.

But the old accounts weren't forgotten. Though his manager never mentioned them, certain names were beginning to come up in the news these days, and the big man would seem to freeze whenever he heard them. Then there was that curious matter of the extra money. The other day, when no one was watching, Gus had slipped a heavy sealed envelope into his hand, and said quietly, "Tuck that in the bottom of your zipper bag, and don't say anything about it. You may never need it, but it's a smart thing to have a little extra cash around."

As he thought of it now, Ronnie shook his head and stopped abruptly a few feet from the door of his suite. Why, really, had Gus given him the money? It didn't quite make sense. He already had a big allowance, more than he could spend. Anyhow, Gus had always seen to it that the Corporation paid for whatever he wanted.

But he had been given extra cash. A great deal, from the feel of the

envelope.

Why?

Ronnie shivered, and moved slowly to his door. With the key in his hand he hesitated, strangely uneasy about entering. All at once he wished he could be down again in the crowded lobby. With people around him he wouldn't feel so—so uneasy. But when he glanced over his shoulder at the distant area of the elevators, he knew he couldn't force himself to go back. Not through that long stretch of empty corridor, where he had just been.

He heard an elevator door open, and saw two men step out. At the same moment he was aware of the faint ringing of one of the telephones in his suite. Why didn't Peter Pushkin answer it, or a guard?

Suddenly, swiftly, he unlocked the door, entered the suite's drawing room, and thrust the door closed behind him. "Peter?" he called. "Joe? Hank?" Then, in rising uneasiness, "Hey, where's everybody?"

No one answered. The only sound was the steady ringing of the telephone over in his bedroom. He ran to it and snatched up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Ronnie! Thank God you answered.…" The voice, hoarse and gasping, belonged to Gus Woolman, but it was barely recognizable. Gus had been away all day." Ronnie, get your bag and get out of there, fast—"

"L-leave here?" he stammered, not immediately comprehending. "But—but where do I go?"

"Anywhere," Gus said hoarsely." Just get going … and don't tell Peter or a soul.… You gotta get out of there before you're caught. That bunch will kill you.… They'll be there in minutes.… Hurry.…" There was a muffled sound, a gasp, then silence.

Ronnie stood frozen, staring at the dead receiver. He was aroused from his trance by an impatient knocking on the outer door. His heart contracted as if a cold hand had clutched it. That couldn't be Peter or one of the guards outside. They would have let themselves in without knocking. And there had been no one in the hall but the men who had stepped from the elevator. Strangers …

A key scraped softly in the lock. It rattled faintly, was withdrawn, then again came the faint scrape and rattle as if another key were being tried. In sudden horror Ronnie remembered that he had not taken time to put the safety chain in place when he entered.

All at once he hurled himself at the bedroom door, closed it and locked it. He ran to the closet, snatched up the small zipper bag containing Gus Woolman's envelope, and sped with it to the side door opening directly into the corridor. With his hand on the knob he paused a moment, listening. Now he could hear sounds in the drawing

room behind him.

They had gotten in already.

Trembling, he managed to ease his corridor door open. Making sure that the way was clear, he tiptoed out and turned right toward the stairway. Panic caught up with him as he started downward, and he began racing madly for the safety of the street, nine stories below.

2
DESTINATION UNKNOWN

AT THE FINAL TURN of the stairway, with the angle of the lobby in sight, Ronnie stopped and clung to the banister, gasping for breath. In his entire descent from the tenth floor he had seen no one, not even a maid or a cleaning woman. But that was to be expected at this hour. The fact that he had heard nothing behind him was not reassuring. The stairs were thickly carpeted. Even now the men could be running to overtake him, only a floor or two away.

If they were after him, he had only seconds to spare. Somehow he must get through the lobby unnoticed, and lose himself on the street.

As he started down the last few steps, he was shaken by the thought that a third man might have been stationed in the lobby to watch for him. In that case his wig and glasses wouldn't help a bit. If he were the only young person around, he would be spotted immediately.

At the edge of the lobby he paused just long enough to give the place a searching glance, then turned left toward the side entrance. He tried to walk naturally and control his ragged breathing, but so many people seemed to be looking at him that it was almost impossible not to break into a mad dash for the street. A few paces from the entrance a man stepped in his path as if to stop him, and he bolted.

Outside, in the warm New Orleans night, Ronnie continued to run as far as the corner, even though he was not followed. The man, he realized, probably hadn't even seen him, but had merely stepped forward to greet a friend.

For a while he drifted with the crowd, too shaken by what had happened to be more than vaguely aware that he was somewhere in that area known as the French Quarter. His mind was in a daze; it was impossible to think what to do. Never in his life, not even in those hungry days in the ghetto, before the reformatory, had he felt so completely lost.

If there was just some place to go, someone he could talk to …

His nostrils caught the odors of food coming from an all-night restaurant on his left. He stopped, uncertain. He didn't feel hungry, but it was nearly midnight, the time when he usually ate his evening meal. If he went in and ordered something, it would at least give him a chance to sit down a while. Then maybe he could figure things out.

Entering, he found a seat at the crowded counter. He started to order a hamburger, but decided upon a full dinner instead. The dinner would give him more time. While he waited for it, he glanced up and saw his pale, thin face staring back at him from the mirror flanking the coffee urn. His heavy glasses gave him a goggle-eyed look like a scared chipmunk. A telltale wisp of blue under one ear caught his attention. He was hastily tucking it out of sight when he heard his name mentioned.

Ronnie almost jumped from his seat, then he realized that the man on his right was talking about him to the waitress.

"Think he's really as smart as they say?" the man was asking her.

"Of course he is! Didn't you ever see him on TV?"

"Yeah, but there must be a trick somewhere. No kid that young—he can't be more than twelve—"

"I've heard he's fourteen," said a man farther down the counter. "But he's small for his age. The only tricky thing about him is that blue hair. I understand it's really white."

"I don't care what color his hair is," the waitress put in. "He's got every right to wear it purple if he wants to. Any boy smart enough to do the things he can do, and earn a million dollars a year—"

"He earned twice that in his last movie," interrupted the second man. "A friend of mine knows a girl who used to room with one of the Blue Boy's secretaries. Did you know that it takes fifteen secretaries just to answer his *fan mail?*"

"No!"

"It's a fact."

Ronnie was grateful when the waitress left to take an order, and the talk about him died. She returned presently, bringing his dinner, and said kindly, "You look kinda lost. Your folks away or something?"

He nodded, unable to speak, and she said, "That's all right. Just be glad you've got folks. Me, I didn't have nobody but a good-for-nothing uncle."

At the moment he would have been willing to settle for any kind of relative, even if the kinship offered only temporary shelter. Still, he thought, the police could give him that.

While he picked at his food he considered going to the police, then decided not to—except, of course, as a last resort. Going to them wouldn't solve anything, and they couldn't protect him indefinitely. As for friends …

He didn't know anyone in New Orleans, and of the hundreds of people he had met all over the world, there wasn't a one he could really call a friend. The Corporation had seen to that. Of course, there were potential friends scattered about, and he would have been on his way to see one of them now had any lived close enough. But most of

them lived abroad.

Well, why not fly abroad, say, to London? His passport was in the zipper bag with his money, and there were at least three important acquaintances in the London area who certainly would help him.

Then he realized it wouldn't work. He was too young, too small. If he went to the airport and asked for a ticket to any distant place, he would attract instant attention. He would probably get the ticket, but not until he had shown his identification and proved he wasn't some crazy kid trying to run away from home.

No, he didn't dare take such a chance. The people who wanted him dead—and he had a pretty good idea who they were—would be able to trace him without the least trouble.

If only he were older, and bigger, he would have no real problem. He would be able to go anywhere in the country and just drop out of sight for a while. But tonight he couldn't even get a room in a second-rate hotel without the risk of being discovered.

What was he going to do?

For the first time since he had become the Blue Boy, Ronnie wished he wasn't so famous. It made hiding a thousand times more difficult.

Suddenly he thought again of the tiny girl from Santo Domingo who had tried to warn him during the performance. What a strange time to warn anyone—unless she had known that trouble was already on the way. It seemed impossible. How could she, of all people, have known anything? As for that silly talk about spells and magic …

All at once he stiffened, and slowly put down the fork he had been toying with. The solution to his problem was staring him squarely in the face. He swallowed as he saw the dangers in it, but it was the only chance he had, and he knew he'd better move fast. Another hour might be too late.

But first he ought to make sure about what had happened.

Ronnie left a generous tip for the waitress, paid his bill, and hurried out to find a telephone. First he called his hotel and asked the switchboard operator to ring Gus Woolman's room.

He waited, breathless, wondering if anyone would answer. He was a little shocked to hear Peter Pushkin's voice in his ear.

"Mr. Woolman is not here," said Peter. "But I am one of his associates. May I take the message?"

Ronnie swallowed. "Peter," he began, "where's Gus? Have you any idea?"

"Ronnie!" the tutor exclaimed. "For heaven's sake, where are you?"

"Never mind where I am. What about Gus?"

"Gus is dead! He was shot in a phone booth trying to make a call. The police are here checking on things."

Ronnie swallowed again. It was what he had expected, but it was still hard to take. “He—he was trying to warn me, Peter. I—I managed to get away, just in time.”

“Good Lord!” Then, sharply, “Ronnie, where are you?”

“Don’t ask me, because I’m not telling anyone.”

“But you must! Don’t you understand? It’s obvious that you know something you shouldn’t. That’s dangerous information. No one as well known as you would have a ghost of a chance alone. You’ve *got* to have protection! Hurry—where are you?”

Ronnie hesitated. Then, thinking of Peter’s cold eyes, he said slowly, “I needed protection when Gus called me. Where were you and the others then?”

He hung up without waiting for an answer, and stood frowning at the telephone book, wondering where to place his next call. How do you locate one particular ship in a port as big as New Orleans? Finally he dialed the Coast Guard.

When the man on duty answered, he made his voice as low as possible, and said, “I’m trying to find a ship called the *Cristobal Colón*.”

“The *Cris*—what?”

He spelled it slowly, and added, “I think she’s a freighter. She’s being loaded now, and will sail in a few hours. Where can I find her?”

“The Captain of the Port could tell you, but that office is probably closed now. Hold it a minute, mister.” There was a murmured consultation, then,” My buddy here knows about her. She’s on a regular run down to the islands. She always loads at the Perry Street wharf.”

“Where is that?”

“On the Algiers side of the river, just above the bridge. If you cross the bridge instead of taking a ferry, look down on the right while you’re crossing, and you’ll see her.”

Ronnie thanked him, hung up, and stood chewing his lip a moment while he planned his next move. The location of the ship made everything more difficult. It meant a long cab ride that would surely be remembered by the driver.

Suddenly he closed his eyes and visualized a map of New Orleans he had studied with much interest when he first came to the city. He had not tried to memorize it, but now a section of it came vividly to his mind and he had no trouble picking out the intersection he wanted.

A few minutes later, in a cab, he said, “Take me over the bridge to Algiers, and let me off at the corner of Burmaster and Monroe.”

Presently, when they were racing over the great high bridge, he looked down and saw the ship outlined in a blaze of lights at the wharf. But all the approaches to the area, for some distance around it,

were dark. The fact troubled him until the cab, after leaving the bridge, finally slowed, and the driver asked him for directions.

"Don't know this section too well," the man admitted. "Seems like I missed your corner somehow."

"That's all right," Ronnie hastened to say. "The house is just a little way through the alley yonder. I'll get out here."

"Better let me drive you around, son. You shouldn't go in them places at night."

"Oh, please don't bother! I—I don't want the folks to know I came home by cab. You understand—I'd have to explain so much."

He was already getting out as he spoke. Now he hurriedly paid the driver and trotted into the alley with a display of assurance he in no way felt. Reaching a shed, he slipped behind it and crouched in the darkness until the cab was out of sight, then came out and began running like a frightened shadow in the opposite direction.

On his right the bridge made a huge, glittering arc across the sky. Directly ahead was the dark area he had noticed earlier. He thought the street would continue on through it, but it came to an abrupt end and he found himself stumbling along a path winding treacherously over broken ground between piles of rubble.

This obviously was not the right way to the wharf. But to find the main approach in the dark might cost him time he couldn't afford to lose. Besides, he could see the glow of lights from his destination some hundreds of yards straight in front of him.

Ronnie paused just long enough to take a small flashlight from his bag. With its help he hastened onward, running whenever he could. Presently he crossed railroad tracks, and suddenly found his way barred by a string of freight cars. He scrambled under the first car, and saw he was close to the long loading platform at the rear of the wharf's warehouse. It was the scene of loud and vast activity. On the other side of it the *Cristobal Colón* was still being loaded.

He slipped his flashlight into his jacket pocket, watched his chance, and managed to climb upon the platform without anyone's seeming to notice him. His first thought was to dart through the nearest huge doorway, and try to slip unseen around the piles of freight to the dock. Then he realized he would attract far less attention if he ignored everyone, and headed boldly for the ship as if he had a perfect right to go aboard.

The warehouse appeared to be acres in extent. He had never been in one before, and every few paces he was forced to leap away from one of the numerous little darting machines trundling freight to the shouting gangs outside. The noise and confusion grew as he neared the dock, and there it became bedlam. With the ship looming before him he stopped, momentarily bewildered by the racket and the

swirling activity around him.

There was a yell, and a gloved hand jerked him away from a dipping cargo sling that could have brained him. A man who might have been a foreman said, “Watch it, boy! What are you doing here anyway? Are you one of the passengers?”

“Y-yes, sir,” Ronnie gulped.

“Then get aboard before you get killed.” The man raised his arm and shouted above the din, “Hold it, Mike! Let this kid up the accommodation ladder.”

Ronnie swallowed and darted across the dock. Hesitantly he started up the long, iron steps suspended from the vessel’s superstructure. He swallowed again when he saw the burly figure in a white jacket waiting at the head of the ladder watching him curiously. If only he had been a little more careful, and waited for the right moment, he could have gone up the ladder unnoticed. But once on deck …

He fought down his sudden terror as he reached the top of the ladder, nodded to the jacketed man, and managed his best smile.

The man surprised him by smiling back and saying pleasantly, “Welcome aboard, son! I’m the chief steward. Getting here a little late, aren’t you?”

“I—I had an errand to run,” Ronnie found himself saying. “Didn’t they tell you?”

“Maybe they told Josip. He’s the cabin steward. Have you met him yet?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, Josip’s new. Our regular man’s in the hospital. But Josip will take care of you. If you want anything, just ask him.”

“Yes, sir. Are—are there many passengers this trip?”

The burly man shook his head. “Too early in the season. You folks will probably have your side of the boat deck all to yourselves.”

“Boat deck? Is that the one the staterooms are on?”

“Right. It’s just above this one.”

Ronnie thanked him, turned, and saw the companionway leading upward. He climbed thoughtfully to the next deck. He had no plan except to hide until the vessel was well out to sea. After that it didn’t matter too much, so long as he could keep his identity a secret. The possibility that the ship might have a few empty staterooms hadn’t occurred to him, but if he could find one without being discovered …

There were several people standing at the rail of the boat deck, watching the loading. He slipped past them and darted through a doorway on his left. A short passageway opened upon a longer one lined with doors. He paused, uncertain. Suddenly, hearing voices coming from the curve on his left, he darted to the right and prayerfully tried the first door. It miraculously opened, and he slipped

quickly into the stuffy darkness beyond.

When his pounding heart had begun to beat normally again, he drew a deep breath, pulled off his jacket, and wiped his hot face with a handkerchief. Finally he reached for his flashlight.

The beam showed a small stateroom with a narrow bunk on either side. The place had several lockers, a shower and toilet compartment at one end, and a washbowl in a corner.

Then shock went through him as the beam fell upon a small traveling bag at the foot of one bunk.

Ronnie whirled to the door. Before he could reach it and leave, it was thrust open in his face. There was the click of a switch, and the place was flooded with light.

He found himself staring into the startled eyes of the tiny girl who had spoken to him at the Regency.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Oh! This is *my* stateroom. The captain said I could have it all to myself. What are *you* doing in it?"

"I—I'm sorry," he faltered. "I didn't know it was taken."

"But what are you doing here? Are you hiding from something?"

The question rattled him. As he struggled for words, her face suddenly changed expression. Her little mouth tightened, and her dark eyes rounded and became immense, hard marbles that seemed to have a force all their own. He was so surprised that he stepped backward, away from her. But he did not move fast enough to avoid her darting hand. Her fingers closed over his heavy glasses and snatched them off.

"Oh!" she whispered. "I thought so!"

He glared at her.

"And your blue hair," she said. "It was only a wig?"

He shook his head and slumped down on one of the bunks. "I'm wearing a wig now to keep it hidden. And since you're so curious, I'm running away. I—I just ducked in here to stay out of sight." Then he added bitterly, "Now that you know about me, I suppose you'll tell everybody I'm aboard."

"Certainly not, you silly thing." She turned swiftly to the door and locked it securely. Coming back, she gave him his glasses, then settled herself cross-legged on the opposite bunk. She studied him like a little owl for a moment, and said, "Something perfectly awful must have happened to make you run away."

"It sure did," he muttered. "How did you recognize me just now?"

"By your voice—and the trouble sign hanging over you."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Don't you know what the *trouble* sign is?"

"I never heard of it."

"Oh, dear." She gave a sad little shake of her head. "And I thought you were so smart. If you don't know what the trouble sign is, it

would be hard for anyone to explain it to you. It—it's something you feel. When I first saw you tonight at the Regency, it was so strong that it made me scared all over. That's why I *had* to warn you immediately." She paused a moment, and asked, "When trouble came, why did you hide on the *Cristobal Colón?*"

"Because I remembered what you said about it, and I knew I had to get out of the country immediately. It's my only chance."

"But haven't you any friends?"

"No."

She stared at him in astonishment. "Not even one?"

"No. I've never had a real friend."

She shook her head again. "How awfully lonely you must be! There was a time, a short time, when I didn't have a friend either. Oh, it was terrible. Then I found two. *¡Gracias a Dios!* Now I'm not quite so afraid."

"But why should you be afraid at all? Haven't you got relatives?"

"Relatives!" Her face twisted as if she had bitten into a lemon. "I'd rather—"

They were interrupted by a sudden rattling of the doorknob, followed by an angry knocking on the door itself. A woman called indistinctly, "Ana María Rosalita? *¿Me oye usted?*"

The small girl slipped quickly to the door, but did not open it. "Yes, I hear you," she replied in Spanish. "Please, Señora, why do you not leave me alone? I am *not* going back to the other stateroom. It is too warm, and the captain said I could have this one all to myself."

There was a sharp exchange between the two. "Little monster!" the woman cried finally. "I will settle with you later!"

Ana María Rosalita stood a moment with her tiny hands clenched, but whether in fury or fright he could not tell. Finally she came back and again sat cross-legged on the bunk. Her pointed chin quivered.

"You see?" she said plaintively. "That is how it is. I am told to call her *tía*—aunt—but the Señora Bretón is not really my aunt at all. She is Bernardo's aunt, and she will do anything he says. If he told her to drown me like a kitten, I am sure she would do it, and love it."

"Who is Bernardo?"

She sniffed. "My very old half brother. He runs everything. He sent the Señora up to this country to take me out of school. I think they plan to send me back to Santo Domingo. Nothing has been said, but I know. I have the trouble sign."

"Really? It hangs over you too?"

"Yes," she said gravely. "It hangs over me, just as it does over you. Can you not see it?"

Ronnie shook his head, hardly knowing what to make of her. Then he became aware that the racket outside had stopped.

He got up suddenly, went to one of the portholes, and held the curtains aside. From where he stood he could not look down upon the dock, nor could he see much of the sky, for most of it was blotted out by the dark silhouette of a lifeboat. But he had a clear view of a small section of the lighted riverfront, and it seemed to be swinging slowly to the left.

The *Cristobal Colón* was under way, turning to head downstream.

"Hey!" he whispered. "We're leaving!"

"Oh, no!" she gasped.

"But don't you want to leave?"

She shook her head, and once more her pointed chin quivered. "I—I've been very unhappy in America, but at least I've been safe here. Now. I'll *never* be safe again."

3
REWARD

RONNIE STOLE A QUICK GLANCE at his wrist-watch, and suddenly realized he should be hunting for an empty stateroom. Now would be a good time, for apparently most of the passengers were still on deck, watching the departure. But he couldn't leave yet. Ana María Rosalita seemed to be in as much trouble as he was.

"'Never be safe again,'" he repeated. "What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said." She looked at him miserably. "Oh, if I'd just been born a boy! Then everything would be so different. I could run away like you are doing, and take care of myself and hide. But when you're a girl—" Abruptly her face changed expression, and she added, "But maybe it's better this way. If I were a boy, I wouldn't be able to see what I can see, and do what I can do—"

"You sound as if you had an Irish grandmother," he told her.

Her chin went up, and for a moment her grand manner returned. "Maybe I *did* have. But you sound as if you don't really believe in *any* of the things I got from her."

Ronnie shook his head. "Don't get me wrong. It's just that, well, you sort of lost me when you started talking about magic."

"But I thought you understood! Back at the Regency you—you said you knew all about magic, and couldn't get along without it!" She looked at him accusingly. "Boy Blue, did you tell me a deliberate lie?"

"Not exactly. I mean, I didn't intend to lie, but you caught me in front of an audience, and I had to say something, fast." He ran his tongue over suddenly dry lips, wondering what to tell her. Secretly he thought most of the so-called magic was for the birds, and that Ana María Rosalita, with her talk of *hechiceras*, trouble signs, and the rest, was just being silly and foolish. Still, she had known he was in danger …

"Please," he begged. "I—I'm not really as smart as people think. It's mainly my memory. And of course I have to bluff a lot, and pretend to know when I don't. But the truth is I—I don't know anything at all about magic."

"Oh." She just looked at him. The way she did it made him feel very small, almost as if he were shrinking.

"But I don't see why I can't learn," he offered hurriedly. "And we

might need each other's help. After all, we're sure in the same boat together."

Suddenly she giggled. "We are in the same boat, aren't we?" Then she added gravely, "And naturally there's a reason for it."

"How do you figure that?"

"Oh, there's a reason for everything. You were sent here for a reason, Boy Blue."

"No one sent me. I came to save my neck."

"Of course you came to save your neck, silly! But you were sent here just the same. And maybe the reason is that we both need help, and are supposed to help each other."

"Oh, I'll go along with it," he said quickly. "When you're as young as we are, and something happens, you're in real trouble if you're all alone. I found that out tonight."

"What happened, Boy Blue?"

"It's, well, sort of involved. Let's talk about you first. What are you afraid of? The Señora?"

Her small face tightened, and she nodded slowly. "The Señora is part of it, yes. That is the main reason I came in here. I am afraid to be in the same room with her at times. And then, I don't want to go back to Santo Domingo. It's an awful place."

"But isn't your home there?"

"Not any more. Not since Papa died." Her chin trembled momentarily, then she said, "Papa was very rich, and a lot of people hated him, but he was all I had. Just before he died he brought me to New Orleans and put me in school, and I was supposed to stay there till I finished. But now Bernardo sends the Señora to take me out. Why? There is no reason to take me out. No good reason, I mean, that makes sense. There is no talk of putting me in another school. And Bernardo does not want me in his house. He lives in Puerto Rico now. So I will have nowhere to go unless the Señora takes me to her home —and *she* lives in Santo Domingo. Anything can happen there, and nobody cares."

She paused and looked up at him earnestly. "Now do you see how I feel?"

He nodded. Suddenly he asked, "Where's this boat going?"

"To Puerto Rico. It always stops at San Juan first, then goes around to Mayagüez. That's near where Bernardo lives."

"What's the next stop after Mayagüez?"

"There isn't any. I mean, it comes straight back here to the mainland."

"Oh."

Ronnie chewed worriedly on his lip. Puerto Rico wasn't quite his choice for a destination. He had had a week's engagement once in San

Juan, and he had never wanted to return. But there was no way out of it now.

All at once he asked, "If the Señora were going to take you to Santo Domingo, I should think she'd go by plane. It would be a lot easier. This is so roundabout."

"Oh, she'd *never* fly. She has a thing about planes. And her home is only a day's trip by boat from Mayagüez. Anyway, she wants to stop and see Bernardo first. After that—"

"What are you going to do?"

She shook her head. "I—I don't know yet. Except that I'm *not* going home with the Señora. I—I'll run away first. But what about you? What will *you* do when we reach San Juan?"

Before he could answer, there was a light knock at the door, and a soft voice said, "Little lady? Are you there?"

Ana María Rosalita got up quickly and went to the door. "Is that you, Josip?"

"Yes, little lady. I saw that your light was still on, and I wondered if you needed anything before I go off duty."

"No, Josip. I'm quite all right. But thank you just the same."

"Well, the breakfast gong will sound at seven. The dining salon is directly below on the next deck. Good night, little lady."

"Good night, Josip."

She came back, frowning, and whispered, "That was Josip Broz, the cabin steward. You're going to have to be *very* careful about him. He's nosy."

Ronnie had already come to that conclusion. A person would have to be outside, on deck, to notice if the stateroom light was still on. He glanced quickly at the curtains, wondering how much Josip might have seen and heard. Well, he would face Josip tomorrow, and the captain too. Maybe something could be worked out. In the meantime …

"Look," he whispered. "It's awfully late. Maybe we'd better get some sleep while we can. It'll take us four or five days to reach San Juan. That will give us plenty of time to think about things and decide what to do. Do you know if the next stateroom is empty?"

"I—I think so. If it's empty, the key will be in the lock. But—but you're *not* going until you tell me why you ran away. What happened? I couldn't *possibly* sleep until I know."

"Okay." He went to the door and listened a moment, then slipped to one of the portholes and carefully parted the curtains. The boat deck appeared empty now. Satisfied, he came back and began to tell her about Gus.

As he talked, a lump rose in his throat. He and Gus had been worlds apart, and the danger he was in now was certainly his manager's fault.

But Gus, besides making him famous, had always treated him well. And at the last, Gus had died trying to warn him in time to escape.

When he finished, Ana María Rosalita sat looking at him like a startled little owl, her dark, saucer eyes turned liquid with sympathy.

"Oh!" she whispered finally. "Oh! And those men, do you think they'll ever be able to trace you here?"

"Sure they can, if they go about it right." He picked up his bag and jacket and turned to the door. "But I'm not going to worry about it now. And don't you worry about the Señora."

"I won't. I feel better about everything, just talking to you. Good night, Boy Blue."

"Good night, *camarada*."

She liked being called that, for her face, which had looked so pinched, suddenly lighted up with a happy smile as he slipped out into the corridor. Well, from now on, she really was a comrade, a partner, for they were certainly in the same boat together, and in more ways than one. Nor did he have any doubt that soon they would be needing each other's help.

The next stateroom, which had a key in the door, was almost exactly like the one he had left. Inside, he put the key in his pocket, bolted the door carefully, then quickly undressed with the aid of his flashlight and crawled into one of the bunks.

He closed his eyes, and tried to make his mind a blank so sleep would come easily. But tonight sleep would not come. The darkness tormented him with sounds and visions he found impossible to block from his memory. Gus on the phone again, hoarse, gasping … the men in the hotel corridor, and the faint scrape of a key in the lock … the terrible pounding of his heart as he fled down an endless stairway …

And in San Juan, would he be fleeing there? But of course he would! Only, where could he possibly go?

He cried out suddenly in torment and sat up, trembling. He knew he ought to be planning what to say to the captain in the morning, but at the moment such thoughts were beyond him. He wanted only to forget himself.

Remembering a light he had seen over the bunk, he fumbled in the dark and turned it on, then opened his zipper bag and took out a book, a pencil, and several sheets of paper. The book, which he had discovered on a shelf devoted to advanced studies in mathematics, was by a little-known master, and it bore an impressive title: *Time and Duality, or the Mathematics of Coexistent Planes*.

Peter Pushkin, seeing the book a few days ago, had thumbed through it, and whistled. "Good grief!" he had said. "If you can read this, you don't need me. I've heard of this fellow Prynne. It's said that

less than a dozen men in the world can really understand him. Do you *like* this sort of thing?"

"Of course!" he had told Peter. He had found it the most exciting and fascinating volume he had ever seen. Dr. Prynne had set out to prove, by the most complicated equations, that the utterly impossible was not only possible, but true.

"But I think Dr. Prynne is wrong," he had hastened to tell Peter. "I'm sure he's made a mistake somewhere. I haven't found it yet, though it ought to be in one of his basic equations. When I've worked through more of them—"

"You mean you're actually doing his mathematics all over?" Peter had looked shaken.

"Well, how else can I prove he's wrong?"

Secretly, way down inside himself, he realized he didn't want to find a mistake. Prynne's fantastic idea was much too appealing. But in spite of the fact that he couldn't believe in it, every equation was absorbing. They were all so utterly absorbing that tonight everything else slipped from his mind. As he studied the figures in the book, the ugliness that had driven him to the *Cristobal Colón* gradually faded and ceased to exist, and presently his pencil was flying over the notepaper.

He was not aware, long later, of weariness overtaking him. Sleep suddenly pinched him out like a candle. It was nearly dawn when it happened, and the vessel was far down in the marshy delta of the Mississippi, not far from the Gulf.

He slept through most of the morning, undisturbed by the breakfast gong and the various sounds of activity outside on deck. It was the new and entirely different motion of the ship that awakened him. He sat up abruptly, started to rub his hot face, and discovered he had fallen asleep with his wig on. He tore it off, glanced at his watch, and scrambled around to peer through the porthole above the bunk. He gasped.

He had flown the oceans a number of times, but only once before—it was on a large liner to Europe—had he actually been to sea. It had been nothing like this. Save for a few glimpses of the cold north Atlantic, he might have been spending his days in another luxury hotel. And when he had jetted across, the water seven miles below had ceased to have existence. But this …

He gave a little cry of delight as he glimpsed the creaming waves beyond the width of the deck. They were the richest blue he had ever seen. And skittering away over the tops of some of them, like silver birds, were schools of flying fish. It was a moment of great wonder.

But he thought of the time, and abruptly reality returned.

It was nearly noon. In a few minutes, probably, the gong would

sound for lunch. What had he better do?

As he realized he was really a stowaway, he experienced a few seconds of pure fright. Then he made a quick decision, and began hurriedly cleaning up and putting on his clothes. He was carefully arranging his wig when he heard the gong. Slipping on his glasses, he took a final look at himself in the mirror, and eased the door partially open. When he heard voices in the passageway he went out, locking the door behind him.

His intention was to follow the other passengers down to the dining salon, a move that would attract much less attention to himself than if he entered alone. But when he reached the turn where the stairs began, he was dismayed to see that the only people in sight were the bronzed, white-haired captain and the Señora Bretón.

They were standing just outside the captain's office, and he was speaking to her in Spanish, telling her about the weather ahead. "It is late in the season for hurricanes," he assured her," and no disturbances have been reported. So we should have an easy passage. We ought to be in San Juan by noon, Wednesday."

"That is good," she said. "Deliver me from hurricanes! I tremble at the mere thought of them."

To Ronnie, the bold-featured Señora didn't look as if she would ever tremble at anything. He started to slip past and go down the stairs, but the captain saw him and called him over.

"Well!" said the bronzed man, extending a huge brown hand. "Didn't know we'd have two young people aboard. I'm Captain Anders. You'll have to tell me who you are, my boy—haven't had time to check the passenger list—"

"I—I'm Ron McHenry, sir," Ronnie told him, taking the extended hand. He had lived briefly with an itinerant family named McHenry, and had been known as the McHenry boy before they abandoned him. "I'm traveling alone, sir, and I may not be on your list yet. Sending me to San Juan by boat was sort of a last-minute thing." Then he added innocently, "Er, did you say there's another boy aboard?"

The captain chuckled. "No such luck, son. You'll have to put up with a girl. Here she comes now."

Ronnie glanced quickly over his shoulder, and saw Ana María Rosalita just leaving her stateroom. His sudden twinge of uneasiness instantly vanished when she came up gravely, aloofly, and went through the captain's introduction as if she had never seen him before.

The captain said, "Ron, since you're alone, why don't you take these good people down to lunch, and have Josip put you at the same table with them. I'd like to join you, but I was on the bridge all night coming down the river, and I've just had breakfast."

The dining salon was a big room amidships with a row of tables on

either side. The row on the right had been taken over by the ship's officers, none of whom, like the captain, were in uniform. Only one table on the left was occupied, this by a plump middle-aged couple who promptly introduced themselves as the Johnsons, on their way to San Juan to visit relatives. Ronnie presently found himself seated near them, listening with one ear to the talkative Mrs. Johnson while he tried to keep his wits about him, and his attention on Josip.

Josip worried him. The white-jacketed cabin steward was a slim little man with short, bristling yellow hair and small, pale, watchful eyes. Ronnie squirmed inwardly whenever the steward came near; it seemed those restless eyes would surely penetrate his wig, or discover a bit of blue showing somewhere.

Josip brought their lunch, then said in his purring voice, "Excuse me, young sir, but I am a little mixed up about you. What stateroom are you in?"

"Seven," Ronnie told him. "I'm Ron McHenry, but as I told the captain, my name may not be on the passenger list. You see, it wasn't decided until the last minute that I was to go to San Juan this way."

"Oh," said Josip. "I did wonder. If you will leave your door unlocked this afternoon, I will see that everything is put in order." He turned to Ana María Rosalita. "I missed you at breakfast, little lady. I do hope you are feeling all right."

"Oh, Josip," she said, "I was just *exhausted*. I slept right through the breakfast call."

Then, when Josip had returned to the pantry, she murmured under her breath to Ronnie, "I thought and *thought* all night. Now I have an idea. Where can we meet and talk about it?"

"On the boat deck. If she says anything, you can tell her you're going out to watch the flying fish with me. But first, I've got to go up and settle things with the captain. Wish me luck."

"Oh, but don't worry about him. He's a friend."

The Señora, seated across from Ronnie, looked at her sharply and said in Spanish, "What are you and that boy talking about?"

"*Voladores*," the tiny girl replied coolly, with a slight lift of one shoulder. "Flying fish. He wants me to go up and watch them with him—as if I had never seen them before."

Ronnie was glad the Señora understood no English, and he was careful to keep his knowledge of Spanish hidden from her. Josip worried him enough, but the cold eyes of the Señora Bretón were strangely chilling. He wasn't afraid that she might recognize him. It was something else he couldn't quite put into words, for it was entirely beyond his experience. No wonder Ana María Rosalita had insisted upon a separate stateroom.

He was relieved when the meal was over, even though he was now

faced with the uncertainty of dealing with the captain.

In his stateroom, his uneasiness began to mount as he took Gus Woolman's envelope from his bag. He did not take time to count the thick packet of bills. They were all of large denominations, and a quick thumbing told him enough. It was a small fortune. When he considered the reasons for being given so much in cash, he felt a return of his earlier fright. Gus, though afraid of what might happen, hadn't seen any solution. Except for the Blue Boy to run and hide—and stay hidden.

He stood biting his lip a moment, then transferred some of the money to his billfold. Finally he started for the captain's office with the envelope in his hand.

The captain, absorbed in papers at a desk, glanced up at his knock and motioned him inside.

"Have a seat, son. I was just checking over things here." The big man scowled at his papers, and grumbled, "A boy traveling alone—somebody should have left a note or something—"

"Oh, I doubt if there is anything, sir," Ronnie said quickly. "As I told you before lunch, my going to San Juan this way was sort of a last-minute thing. There wasn't time to—to make proper arrangements. So I was given enough cash so I could pay the fare to you. Er, how much is it, sir?"

"A hundred and forty dollars."

Ronnie took two hundred-dollar bills from his billfold and handed them over.

Gravely the captain made change and wrote out a receipt. Then he thrust an empty pipe between his teeth and leaned back in his chair. "Keep your seat," he ordered, as Ronnie started to rise. "There's a little more to this than merely paying your fare. Remember, this isn't a city bus you're riding on. It happens to be a vessel under American registry on the high seas. As master of it, I'm not only responsible for you, but I'm in charge of you."

"Y-yes, sir." Ronnie swallowed. Those brilliant blue eyes boring into him were entirely too penetrating.

"In the first place," the captain went on, "this is doggoned irregular. Boys your age just don't come aboard unannounced, all alone, and pay their fare in cash. I've got grandchildren older than you, and they're all in school. Why aren't you in school?"

Ronnie put forth his best smile, which he had often used to cover a moment of uncertainty. "It's because I'm moving. I'm going down to the West Indies to live. Just where, I won't know until after I get to San Juan."

"I see. And you say your name is Ron McHenry?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll have to make a record of this and report it. First, you'd better show me some identification. Then I'll need your father's name and address, his line of business, the name of the person who'll meet you in San Juan—"

"But I don't have any proper identification, sir. I don't even have parents. All I had was a guardian, but he died suddenly, and that's why I'm on my way to San Juan. Why can't you just put down my name, and list me as a student? What's the difference? If I were a few years older, you wouldn't bother with all this."

"True," said the captain. "But you're not a few years older. If you're thirteen, I'll be surprised. You're traveling alone, and if there are any questions about you in the future, I'll have to come up with the answers. Now, you must have something with your name on it in your billfold. Let's have a look at it."

Ronnie had seen this coming from the first. He had tried his best to aviod it without resorting to pure fiction, which would have collapsed in a minute under the captain's probing. Suddenly making one of his quick decisions, he got up and closed the door, then pulled off his glasses and wig.

"I'm Ronnie Cleveland," he said. "You saw me last night at the Regency. I—I'm in real trouble, and I sure need your help."

Captain Anders blinked twice, and very slowly set his pipe down on the desk. He said softly, "I *thought* there was something familiar about you! Of all things, I'd just finished listening to a news report about the Blue Boy, when in you came." He indicated a radio on the desk.

"What are they saying?" Ronnie asked.

"Well, you've put the world on its ear by disappearing. There's a reward out for you."

"Oh, no!"

"There certainly is. A big reward. Why did you run away?"

Ronnie drew a deep breath, then began to tell him.

4
GIRL WITHOUT A COUNTRY

THE CAPTAIN SHOOK HIS WHITE HEAD when Ronnie had finished. "It's a terrible situation, son. Personally, I think you made a mistake in not going to the police immediately—though of course I can see why you didn't. And you could be right. Being who you are …"

"If I'd been an adult," said Ronnie, "I would have gone to the police. An adult has rights. He—he can come and go as he pleases. But I can't. If I'd gone to them, they'd protect me for a while, sure. Then what?"

"Well?"

"Can't you see? I'm a minor. They'd be forced to turn me over to the first person with any sort of a legal claim to me. Someone connected with the Corporation, like Wally or one of the others, or even Peter Pushkin. I—I don't trust any of them."

"H'mm. The news report said Pushkin is your tutor. Who's this Wally?"

"His name's Wally Gramm. He's Gus Woolman's partner. The Corporation was his idea, so he'll probably run it from now on. And I'm sure he'll be appointed as my next guardian."

"You don't think much of him, eh?"

Ronnie swallowed. "It isn't easy to explain. He and Gus were a pair of sharpies. I knew that from the first. But Gus, well, I felt I could trust him. I mean, I knew where I stood with him, and he always kept his word. But Wally—"

The captain shook his head again. "I'm afraid I don't quite follow you, son. With all due respect for your thinking, it seems more logical that this fellow Wally would be the one person most interested in protecting you. After all, if anything happened to the Blue Boy, he'd lose a gold mine."

"Wally wouldn't lose much. I'm insured. What I'm trying to explain is that I wouldn't be safe with *anyone* in the Corporation. It would be too easy for those people to find me."

"*What* people, son?"

"The ones who want me dead. They think I know more than I really do." Ronnie stopped a moment, then added, "You see, all I know are some records that Gus and Wally had me memorize."

"But surely, if there are names in the records—"

"There are lots of names and numbers, but they don't prove anything. I don't even know what they mean. I can guess, but it's sort of like trying to figure out how many gallons a tank will hold when you know but one of its measurements."

"H'mm." The captain scowled, picked up his pipe, and set it down again. "So now you're in a spot. What do you plan to do?"

"Well, I've got to hide. If I can find a safe place, and be left alone a while, I believe I can figure everything out. It's just a matter of remembering, really. But it won't be easy, because I'll have to dig up a lot of little things I wasn't paying any attention to when I heard them." He paused, and said, "If—if you'll just keep it a secret about me—"

"Of course I'll keep it a secret!" the captain exclaimed. "And I'll help you any way I can. I'll start by listing you as Ron McHenry, student. Next—" The big man grunted, and scowled at his empty pipe. "There's a matter of money. You are probably a very rich young man, but that's of no help at the moment. Have you any cash?"

"Plenty." Ronnie thrust the heavy envelope across the desk. "Gus saw what was coming and gave this to me. I wish you'd put it in your safe till we reach San Juan."

Gravely the captain taped and sealed the envelope, made a notation on it, locked it away, then wrote out a receipt to Ron McHenry. "Now," he said, "let's look ahead. The best place I can think of for a person your age to hide is in a private school."

Ronnie nodded. "I've thought of that, sir. But it would be hard to get in without being, er, sponsored by someone."

"I'll take care of that. Before we dock, I'll write a number of letters for you, introducing you as Ron McHenry. If we have no trouble, I'll go with you and make the arrangements. There's a good boarding school just west of the city in Bayamón. The only thing that worries me is those men who were after you. If they are smart enough to trace you to my vessel, they could fly to San Juan ahead of us."

"I've thought of that too," Ronnie told him. "But if they are anywhere on the dock waiting for me, I'll recognize them."

"Then what?"

"Then I'd better watch my chance, and take off alone."

"But where will you go?"

"I—I don't know. I'll have to sort of play it by ear. But I'll think of something when the time comes."

The captain shook his head. "That's dangerous. You've *got* to have a destination. Don't overlook the fact that a reward is being offered for you. Do you see what that does? Everybody in this hemisphere will be on the watch for you."

“Oh, golly.” Ronnie felt a slow chill going through him. “Who—who’s offering the reward? How much is it?”

“Son, it was just a short radio report. It said the Blue Boy was missing, and that his manager had been murdered. Everybody is talking about it, and the general belief is that you’ve been kidnapped. Your company is offering fifty thousand dollars to anyone who can help them locate you.” The captain frowned, and shook his head. “Somehow I don’t like that reward business. You said you talked to your tutor on the phone after you ran away. So he knows you’re in danger. Surely, if he told your company, they wouldn’t be so foolish as to publicly offer a reward that large, when it could cost you your life.”

Ronnie sat chewing his lip in silence, wondering about Peter Pushkin. The idea of the reward was all wrong. But was Peter to blame for it, or was somebody just being stupid?

Thoughtfully he began replacing his wig and glasses. As he considered Peter, another possibility rose in his mind. It was a shocking possibility, and his hand trembled as he realized how much it would add to his danger. But maybe he was wrong. There wasn’t any proof.…

The captain said, “You’ve got to get rid of that blue hair somehow. You can’t wear a wig all the time.”

“I’ll dye it. As soon as I’ve found a place to stay.”

“Which brings us back to that destination I was talking about.” The captain found a tobacco pouch and absently began to fill his pipe. “Son, have you ever been to San Juan?”

“Yes, sir. I was there last January.”

“Good! How well do you know the island?”

“Ronnie shook his head. “All I saw was the city.”

“Well, I’ve a map you can have. But first, my hotel. It’s the Excelsior, on Ponce de Leon Avenue.”

“I know where that is.”

“All right, here’s my idea. If I can get you ashore safely, we’ll put up at my hotel for the night, and do something about your hair. The next morning I’ll take you over to that school. If we are separated, and you are forced to go it alone, meet me at the hotel as soon as you can—but you’ll have to make it before noon the next day. In the afternoon I’ll be heading around the island for Mayagüez.”

The captain touched a match to his pipe, then fished through some papers and produced a road map of the island. He spread it upon the desk.

“Here’s Mayagüez,” he said, pointing with a pencil to a town on the west coast. “And here, about twelve miles above it, is the Beach of the Three Brothers. If you go beyond the beach a couple miles, to where the road cuts into the mountains, you’ll see a little grove of breadfruit

trees on the left. Do you know what a breadfruit tree looks like?

"Oh, sure."

"Well, you can't miss them because there are no others in the area. On the other side of the grove you'll see a yellow beach cottage in the shade of a big mango tree. That's where I spend my vacations. You'll find the key buried in a coconut shell in the left corner of the steps."

The big man chuckled at Ronnie's surprise, then went on seriously," You're in a bad situation, son. Anything can happen after we dock. So you've absolutely got to have an emergency destination. What if the schools are all filled? What if we can't meet at the hotel? Then head for the cottage. There's plenty to eat, and you'll be able to hide there indefinitely. However, it's a long way from San Juan, and if you're forced to go there—" The captain scowled at his pipe, and added, "I'd suggest you travel from town to town, using different cabs. And make the last stop the beach—as if you were meeting friends for a picnic. You can walk it from there."

Then the captain dropped his little bombshell. "You won't have to worry about neighbors, except for Ana María Rosalita's half brother. He lives in the old Montoya villa way up on the mountainside. The family owns all the land around there."

Ronnie sat up. "You—you're talking about *Bernardo* Montoya?"

"That's right. She must have told you about him. I bought the place from their father, old Carlos, just before he died. In fact, I helped Carlos escape from Santo Domingo. He'd given up his American citizenship, you see, and gone there to live. It's a very curious story."

It was, indeed, a story of incredible events, in which poor Ana María Rosalita was the victim. Ronnie's mind was reeling with it when he finally reached the boat deck in search of her.

He was disappointed to find only the Señora Bretón, who was taking her siesta in a deck chair. As he slipped past her, heading for the walkway leading around to the other side of the ship, he was startled to see how sleep could change her. The handsome features had turned cruel and ugly, as if some hidden evil were now exposed. He shuddered, and was suddenly thankful he wasn't in the tiny girl's place. His future seemed unpleasant enough, but at least he was on his own.

At the edge of the starboard deck he paused. Seeing only the plump Johnsons stretched out in their chairs, he retreated to an angle in the walkway and stood looking at the great sweep of bright-blue water stretching astern. While part of his mind drank it in hungrily, another part thought of what Captain Anders had just told him.

"It was like this," the captain began, explaining first about the cottage." I'd been renting the place from old Carlos for years, but he

wouldn't sell it to me. Then he practically gave it to me after I helped him. In Santo Domingo he became a bigwig until they had one of those political upsets. Then he had to get out in a hurry or be killed."

"And you got him out?"

"Yes, but that part of it was nothing. I was on vacation at the time, and all I had to do was rent a fast boat and pick him up one night. The big deal was getting Ana María Rosalita safely away. Somehow those natives got the idea she was a witch—"

"A *witch?*"

"Yeah, and a black one, which is bad. They don't mind white witches, the good kind. But a black one …" The captain shook his head. "I think the old man's enemies spread the tale about her. Anyway, he tried to slip her out of the country, but she was recognized and a mob took after her. If it hadn't been for that young Negro—Black Luis, he calls himself—she wouldn't be here now. That fellow—he can't be much older than you—managed to steal a little open fish boat, and he sailed her all the way across Mona Passage to Puerto Rico. Old Carlos lived long enough to take her to New Orleans and put her in school, but he died before he could do anything about her citizenship. It's a doggone shame."

"What's wrong with her citizenship?"

"She hasn't got any!"

"But that's crazy—"

"Of course it's crazy, but that's how it is. She was born in Santo Domingo, same as her mother, so she ought to be a citizen of the Dominican Republic. But they won't give her a passport because they claim her mother was Irish, and her father an American."

"Was her mother really Irish?"

"Irish parentage, yes. Been dead for years. Her father was automatically an American citizen because he was born in Puerto Rico, but he renounced his citizenship when he went to Santo Domingo. When they ran him out, he became a man without a country. He died before he could change it, and that makes Ana María Rosalita a girl without a country."

"What—what in the world's going to happen to her when we reach Puerto Rico?"

The captain looked grave. "If I know Bernardo, he'll see that that devilish aunt of his takes her straight on to Santo Domingo. I'm sure the Señora can get her in without trouble. But once there, that will be the end of her. She'll simply disappear."

"But—but, golly, can't something be done to help her?"

"It's got me beat. I'm going to retire next month, and I'll have time to look into it. But that doesn't help matters now." The big man shook his head. "Puerto Rico's like a foreign country. No one but Bernardo

himself could really straighten the thing out. He has the power and the money. But the fellow is a rascal …"

Ronnie, looking thoughtfully astern, had forgotten his own troubles entirely when he was aware of movement out of the corner of his eye. Turning, he saw Ana María Rosalita hurrying toward him.

"Boy Blue, you were so *long* with the captain," she began worriedly. "Surely you had no trouble?"

"Oh, no," he told her. "It was just that I couldn't fool him. I had to tell him everything. And I'm glad I did. He turned out to be a real friend."

"Oh, I *knew* he would be. You see, he's one of my two friends."

"Is the other one Black Luis?"

The tiny girl nodded. "Did the captain tell you what happened?"

"Yes," Ronnie replied soberly. "And now I know you're in a worse spot than I am. I've been trying to figure out what to do."

"But I decided last night I'll run away," she said quickly. "As I told you, I thought and thought for hours—first about you, then about me. If you can get into a private school—"

"No," he interrupted. "The captain had the same idea. Only, I don't believe I'd better."

"But you'd be safe—"

"Maybe. Though I think I'll be just as safe in that beach cottage he got from your father."

"Oh, no!" she said instantly. "Don't go there!"

"Why not?"

"Because it's the wrong place to hide. I *know!* It was the first place I thought of, because it's so near Papa's old villa, where Bernardo lives. And of course I wanted you there, for now you're my third friend, and I'd feel so much better knowing you were near. But I was just being selfish. You must not go there."

He looked at her curiously. His main reason for deciding to go to the beach cottage was so he would be near enough to help her. For surely, if the captain was right, she was going to need all the help she could get.

"I don't understand, *camarada*," he said finally. "What's wrong with it?"

Her dark eyes grew round and fearful. "Boy Blue, every time I think of you going to the cottage, your trouble sign turns almost black. That means something terrible will happen."

He looked grimly at the vessel's wake, flowing into the distance. "Then I'd better stay away," he muttered. "Only, I don't want to go to a school—"

"Oh, but you don't have to," she hastened to say. "I've another plan,

just in case. You must find Black Luis."

"Black Luis?" he repeated, startled.

"Yes. That's what I am going to do if I have to run away from Bernardo."

"Where is he?"

"I—I don't know exactly," she admitted. "But he can always be found by the right person—someone like you or me, or Captain Anders. You see, he's had to go underground since Papa died."

"Underground? You mean he's hiding?"

"Of course he's hiding, silly. If Bernardo finds him, he'll be sent back to Santo Domingo, which would be awful. Papa gave him a little piece of land for helping me, and he's hiding on it with someone named Marlowe. I think that greedy Bernardo wants the land back. Just why, I don't know. It—it's been so hard for Black Luis and me to keep in touch with each other. To get a letter to him I have to send it to Nicky Robles, who works at the beach near Córcega. Then Nicky has to take it around the point and put it in the hollow of an old sea grape tree. The only trouble is, well—"

She turned and looked at him uncertainly, her lower lip caught between her small white teeth. "It's the stamps," she said. "Black Luis doesn't have money to buy them, so I would always send him some when I could. But we haven't been able to write to each other for a long time because Bernardo cut off my allowance."

"Cut off your allowance! But why?"

"Because he's a stinker. Someday, if he isn't careful, I'll wish him warts, and he'll break out all over with them. Millions of warts."

Ronnie eyed her in disbelief. "You can't really do that, can you?"

Her chin came up. "Certainly I can! I haven't tried it yet, because it's such an awful thing to do to anyone. It should be kept for emergencies. But I've been tempted. Oh, it was so embarrassing to be without a penny, so that I couldn't even pay back favors I owed the other girls. And how I wanted some pralines! Imagine going to school in New Orleans and being too poor to buy a single praline!"

It was mainly a growing amazement that made Ronnie shake his head. Suddenly he asked, "Do you really like pralines so well?"

"Oh, I love them. They're my favorite sweet."

"Then wait till I get back. I've a whole box of them in my bag."

He hastened around the deck, and went inside to his stateroom. The door, which he had left unlocked but closed, was open now, and he entered so quickly that the cabin steward was taken momentarily by surprise.

Josip was standing between the bunks, absorbed in the precious copy of *Time and Duality*. The steward looked up, and his thin lips parted briefly. But almost instantly the lips closed and twisted into a

smile.

"You must pardon me, young sir, but I am a great reader, and I simply cannot resist a book when I see one lying around. This one seems very interesting. Very interesting indeed." Josip closed it, placed it on the bunk, then picked up a bundle of soiled towels and started out. On the threshold he paused briefly and said, "I will bring you some ice water later, young sir."

Ronnie said nothing. His swift anger had given way to a feeling of sickness in his stomach. Before going to lunch, he had carefully put the copy of *Time and Duality* away in his zipper bag.

Josip had deliberately opened the bag—obviously to search for something that would prove what he already suspected. And Josip had found it.

The book had been of interest to him for one reason only. The name "Ronnie Cleveland" was written on the flyleaf.

5
THE LAST BEEHIVE

IT WAS UPSETTING ENOUGH to realize that Josip knew his secret and probably would try and profit from it, but with it went the growing fear of what would be waiting for him when he reached San Juan. To these concerns, as the vessel plowed steadily southeastward, there was added a physical discomfort that threatened to become serious. It was his wig.

He had never been forced to wear it for long in a tropical climate. It had been designed merely to hide his own hair, which was thick and curly, and he had seldom minded its tightness in air-conditioned buildings. But here at sea it was becoming a torture to keep it on for more than an hour at a time.

On the second day out, when his furiously hot and itching scalp had twice driven him to his stateroom to plunge his head into a basin of cool water, Ana María Rosalita offered a solution.

"If you'll let me trim your hair a little," she said, "maybe it will feel better under the wig. You've just *got* to keep it hidden till you find Black Luis. Then he and Marlowe can do something about it. They're awfully clever about all sorts of things."

She brought scissors and a comb to his stateroom and started to work. But as the first blue curl fell to the floor, she wailed tearfully, "Oh, I just can't cut them. They're so beautiful!"

"Beautiful my eye," he muttered. "I'm sick of 'em! Whack 'em off!"

After that she surprised him by giving him an expert trim, which relieved the discomfort of the wig without making it too loose. When she had finished, she studied him critically a moment, then suddenly giggled.

"So I'm funny," he grumbled. "What is it?"

"I'm not laughing at *you*, silly. I'm laughing at *us*."

"Well, I guess we are a sort of funny pair, *camarada*."

"Funny! *¡Madre mía!* Here we are, just a couple of little kids, people would say—people that don't know us. Because we're smaller than we should be, and look younger than we are. And we act like kids most of the time. But we're not, really. Not inside."

"No," he admitted. "We're not."

"Inside," she said, "you're grown-up and know more than lots of the

smartest people. And me, I'm old, old, *old* inside, and know things you'll *never* know. And why? I'll tell you a secret: I really *did* have an Irish grandmother. She was a daughter of the Shee."

Ronnie, carefully picking up blue curls and putting them into a bag to be thrown overboard, jerked his head up at the word. The tiny girl said, "I don't know how it's spelled, but that's how it's pronounced. Have you ever heard of them?"

"Sure, I've read about 'em," he said." The name was spelled S-i-d-h-e in the book, but pronounced 'Shee.' They are sort of mythical Celtic beings who were supposed to have all kinds of special powers."

"My grandmother had special powers, and she wasn't mythical," the girl retorted. "I inherited what I have from her. And I really *can* make people have warts."

"I didn't say you couldn't," he told her.

"No, but you thought it, and that's practically the same as saying it."

"Okay. Let's say you have special powers. Then why can't you use them to keep people like Bernardo from hurting you and sending you away?"

"Because I'm too *little*," she said. "I can't get up enough—what's the word?"

"Steam?" he suggested.

She giggled. "That's good enough. Steam. When I grow bigger I'll have more steam, and I'll be able to flatten Bernardo, though of course I wouldn't hurt him, even though I hate him. My grandmother said I must never use my power to really hurt or take advantage of someone, or I'll lose it. Though of course it's all right to help others. Last year, when Marlowe and Black Luis were trying to get me out of Santo Domingo, I practically wore myself to a frazzle—"

"Wait a minute. You say Marlowe was with you?"

"Of course he was with us. Without his help we couldn't possibly have managed!"

Ronnie scowled at her. "That's funny. The captain didn't mention him when he told me about how you escaped."

"The captain has never even seen Marlowe. That's why."

"Oh. What's he like? What sort of person is he?"

"He—he's not exactly a person, Boy Blue, though I think of him as that. I mean," she added hesitantly, "he's more of a—a personage."

Ronnie stared at her. "Are you trying to tell me he's not real?"

"Of course he's real, silly! But, well, instead of my trying to—to explain him to you, maybe it would be better to wait till you meet him."

Ronnie sighed. He still didn't know how to take Ana María Rosalita. She was so full of surprises and contradictions. Likely as not Marlowe

would turn out to be entirely imaginary.

"Okay," he said. "But how do I find Black Luis' place? You said it was somewhere below the Córcega beach, and that there was an old sea grape tree near it. But that doesn't help too much, especially if I'm trying to find someone who's hiding. How far is it from the captain's cottage?"

"Oh, dear." She shook her small head. "I—I can't even guess about distances. It's probably miles and miles." Suddenly she brightened. "I know! It's at the last beehive."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Don't you know what a beehive is, silly?"

He grinned. "Could it be something bees live in?"

"Oh, *Madre mía*, I don't mean that kind of a beehive. Maybe I should have said haystack. That's what most people call them—the haystack hills. Only they look more like beehives to me. They are those funny little mountains that stretch all along the coast and down almost to Mayagüez."

"Oh, those!" He had caught only a brief and distant glimpse of them when he had flown to San Juan, but it had been enough to whet his imagination. The haystack hills were geological curiosities. Formed of eroded limestone, they stood out against the high mountains behind them like hundreds of giant green cones.

"When Papa offered Black Luis some land," she said, "he chose that piece with the last beehive on it. It's right on the beach, and you can almost see it from the captain's place. So you shouldn't have *any* trouble finding it."

"But what about Black Luis? If he's hiding out—"

"Oh, don't worry about that. Marlowe will take you to him."

"But how do I find Marlowe?"

She giggled. "You can't. Not if you looked a thousand years. Just go there, and he'll find *you*."

The Dry Tortugas were abeam that evening, and old Fort Jefferson, that incredible monster of the Gulf, was a grim gray ghost on the horizon. The next morning Ronnie could make out the mountains of Cuba off to starboard. The mountains were visible all day, becoming higher and nearer as the vessel moved steadily down the Old Bahama Channel, which separates the big island from the Bahamas. Schools of flying fish erupted constantly from the blue water like little silver birds, and dolphins raced them on either side.

Late that afternoon the trade wind began to blow. It boomed all night, and it was still strong the next morning. For the first time the Señora did not appear at breakfast, nor did she come out and take her accustomed place in the deck chair afterward.

"She's *mareada*," Ana María Rosalita reported happily. "Seasick. Am I glad! Now I don't have to keep putting the eye on her."

" 'Putting the eye …,' " Ronnie repeated. "What in the name of the seven saints are you talking about?"

"Oh, dear. Won't you *ever* understand about me?" the tiny girl said. "The Señora hates me—"

"I know she hates you. She called you a little monster that first night when I came aboard."

"She hates me because she's afraid of me, and when I'm not watching she tries to beat me. Do you understand, Boy Blue?"

"Not quite."

"But it's so simple. She knows I have powers, and that makes her afraid, and naturally when you're afraid of something so small you get angry and want to hit it—especially when it's Bernardo's half sister that you'd rather see drowned. Therefore—"

"Therefore what?"

"Therefore I am forced to put the eye on her to protect myself. Before we came aboard, she hit me twice when I wasn't watching, and my head still has a buzzing in it. But when I use what power I have and put the eye on her, she cannot raise her hand. At night, of course, I am safe, for I lock myself in my stateroom. But during the day I must be on guard all the time, and it is such a strain. Now she is seasick, *gracias a Dios*, and I pray she remains that way."

"I see," Ronnie said, his brain spinning.

"And now I can enjoy everything," she went on gaily. "The flying fish, the beautiful sea, talking to you … Oh, I wish we could sail on and on like this, for days and days and days. Wouldn't it be wonderful?"

It would indeed be wonderful, Ronnie thought, if only there was some way to escape from things …

"But this is the fourth day," she added suddenly, and now there was a break in her voice. "Tomorrow it will be over, for we will reach San Juan. And by tomorrow night I will be in Bernardo's house, which is practically the same as saying that I will be in jail."

Ronnie chilled. He hadn't wanted to think of San Juan. But soon he must face the moment when the ship would reach her dock, and he would be forced to get off.

The thought of what might be waiting for him filled him with dread.

Later that morning, soon after lifeboat drill, the high peaks of Haiti were abeam. The mountains continued, wrapped in mist, and became Santo Domingo in the afternoon. It was a wild and mysterious expanse of coast, and at any other time Ronnie would have been fascinated by

it. But there was something sinister about it that repelled him, and it only added to the foreboding that had been growing in him.

That night he awoke from a dream of terror so real that he leaped trembling from his bunk before he realized he was still safely aboard the *Cristobal Colón*.

In the dream the vessel had already reached San Juan. Ana María Rosalita and the other passengers had gone ashore, and he was waiting for the captain to return from the steamship office on the other side of the dock building. "Stay aboard," the captain had ordered, "and keep out of sight. I've a little business to take care of, but it won't take me ten minutes. When I come back I'll bring a cab, and we'll leave the dock area together."

It had seemed like a good plan. But the captain was hardly out of sight when, peering from his hiding place in the deck shelter, Ronnie glimpsed the same two men who had stepped from the elevator back in New Orleans. They were standing in the shadow of one of the doorways, where they could see everyone who came ashore. That was shock enough. But a worse shock followed when a third man—a man he recognized in spite of a changed appearance—stepped quickly across the dock and started up the accommodation ladder.

He was trapped on the ship. The only way off was down the ladder. If he escaped the man coming aboard, he would be at the mercy of the two watching for him on the dock.

That was only half the dream. The rest of it was the bad part, and Ronnie tried to block it from his mind by doing over an equation from *Time and Duality*. Last night he thought he'd found a mistake in Dr. Prynne's mathematics, and he'd been anxious to recheck it.

But for the first time since getting the book, Dr. Prynne's fantastic theory failed to hold him. The dream was too horribly real. He kept seeing himself running through the ship, frightened, desperate … seeing Josip blocking the way, demanding money to hide him … then suddenly hitting the steward, and racing forward on the next deck where the stevedores were beginning to unload.…

There was the moment of uncertainty when he thrust a handful of bills upon a startled winch operator … and the greater uncertainty when he was hoisted over the ship's side in a cargo net—only to discover that he had been sighted, and that one of the watching men had drawn a weapon and was pointing it at him.…

He awoke before he reached the dock. And that, in a way, was the worst part of it. Had he dreamed what was really going to happen tomorrow, and was he going to be killed?

When he met Ana María Rosalita on deck in the morning, the ship was crossing Mona Passage and the blue-green mountains of Puerto

Rico were rising ahead.

The tiny girl said, “You hardly spoke at breakfast. What’s wrong, Boy Blue?”

Reluctantly he told her about his dream.

“Oh, dear!” Her eyes widened. “And it was real? I mean, *real* real?”

“The realest thing ever,” he muttered. “That’s why it—it sort of shook me.”

Her brow puckered. “My grandmother told me that a *real* real dream is supposed to happen just exactly as it’s dreamed, and that it should be looked upon as—as—”

“As a warning?”

“Not entirely. I mean, it should be used as a guide, so that you’ll know what to do when—”

“Guide nothing! That dirty rat with a pistol was out to get me—and if there’s any truth in the dream, he will.”

“No he won’t,” she said.

“Who’s going to stop him?”

“*I* will. I’ll put the eye on him.”

“But—but you can’t. You’ll be getting off the ship before I do. You’ll be gone.”

“No I won’t. Ramón—he’s Bernardo’s chauffeur—is supposed to meet us at the dock, but he’s always late. And if he isn’t late enough, I’ll do something brattish to—to hold things up.” She gave him a pinched, wistful little smile, and added, “I’ve just got to protect you, Boy Blue, because I’ve an awful feeling I’ll be needing your help soon.”

He didn’t feel any better in spite of all she had told him, but he couldn’t help liking her more. If only she wasn’t quite so looped on magic, he thought suddenly, she’d really be a wonderful person.

The curious haystack hills were clearly in view in another hour. She was pointing out to him the end of the mountain chain where he would have to go, when they were interrupted by Josip.

“Young sir,” the steward purred,” the captain would like to see you right away.”

Ronnie wondered grimly how much Josip had learned, other than his identity. At least no one else seemed to have had any second thoughts about him. The Blue Boy had hardly been mentioned in the dining salon; and apparently, because he ate at the Señora’s table, everyone assumed he was a member of her group.

In his office the captain said, “I’ll be going on the bridge soon, and won’t see you till we dock. So I thought we’d better talk over a plan of action now. Then there’s the problem of your money.”

Ronnie chewed thoughtfully on his lip. “If—if you’ve a steamship agent in Mayagüez, maybe you’d better turn that envelope over to

him. It'll be safer than if I carried it, and I can get it any time later if I need it."

"Good idea. But why Mayagüez? Have you given up the school idea and decided on the cottage?"

"Yes, sir. And I thought I'd look up Black Luis."

"H'mm." The blue eyes bored into him. "I like that. And son, please, keep in touch with me by way of the ship's agent. It could be important. Also—" The captain thrust two envelopes across the desk. "You may need identification as Ron McHenry; these letters will take care of it."

The blue eyes fastened on him again. "Now, how do you feel about going ashore?"

Ronnie swallowed. "I'm scared."

"Well, if we work things right, I'm sure you can get away safely. I've a simple little plan. It merely requires getting a cab to the dock."

Ronnie, a bit dazed, returned finally to his stateroom and began packing his belongings into his zipper bag. There wasn't much. Just his extra shirt and a few articles of clothing he had washed out the night before, and his jacket, which he wouldn't need in the tropic heat. He was tempted to leave it behind, then realized it might be useful if he ever managed to get out of San Juan. If …

He could still feel the shock that went through him when he heard the captain's plan. It was exactly the way he had dreamed it. Even the captain's phrases were the same: *Stay aboard … keep out of sight … little business … but it won't take me ten minutes … I'll bring a cab …*

It was one thing to have a startlingly real dream, but quite another to begin experiencing the reality of it. The rest would follow soon. The ship would dock right after lunch, and it was nearly lunchtime now.

When the gong rang he forced himself to go down, though he had no appetite. Across from him Ana María Rosalita sat picking at her food, merely pretending to eat. Finally she smiled almost timidly, and whispered, "Please, I know how you feel, but you mustn't be afraid. Didn't I promise it would be all right?"

Before he could reply, the Señora, whom he had not seen since they were passing Cuba, came in and took her place like a disgruntled gorgon. In her presence the tiny girl seemed to shrivel.

In that moment something strange happened to Ronnie. Ana María Rosalita had troubles enough for anyone, yet she had put them entirely aside and thought only of trying to help him. Had he ever done that for anyone? He realized he hadn't. And it came to him all at once that fear for his own safety would never give his courage a boost. Only concern for others would do that.

He ignored the gorgon's scowl and said, "Thank you, *camarada*. I—I know I'll make it now. And don't *you* worry about things, because I'm

going to be near."

When Ronnie stood on deck a little later, bag in hand, his newly gained courage almost deserted him. The *Cristobal Colón* was now creeping through the narrow entrance into San Juan Bay. As he watched the grim old fort and the city wall slide past on his left, his heart started to pound, and everything around him seemed to begin moving in slow motion.

It continued that way while the vessel rounded the point and inched toward her dock in the ancient part of the city. Even after she was tied up and the accommodation ladder lowered, the gangs of waiting stevedores swarmed aboard and started work as if attuned to a different rhythm than his own. From his vantage point in the deck shelter, where he could study the dock area without being seen, he watched the Johnsons go ashore followed by several crewmen carrying baggage. Behind them, very slowly, came the Señora and Ana María Rosalita. At last came the captain.

Ronnie's hands became unsteady as the captain vanished within the warehouse. His attention was now on the two men who had appeared at the edge of the nearest doorway. They were the same men he had seen in New Orleans. And they wore the exact clothing they had had on in the dream—workman's apparel that allowed them to fit into their present surroundings without attracting attention.

Their presence here in the flesh was bad enough. But it was the abrupt appearance of the third man that jolted Ronnie. The neat, trim figure that crossed the dock and began climbing the accommodation ladder was so changed as to be hardly recognizable as the Peter Pushkin he knew. But it was Peter with a haircut, and without the atrocious red beard.

Ronnie swallowed, and fled.

His flight took him inside and down two decks, straight into the arms of Josip.

"Not so fast, young sir," the cabin steward purred, seizing him firmly. "I know who you are."

"Lemme go!" Ronnie cried.

"You'd better listen to me, boy! You need help—and I'm the one to hide you. For five hundred dollars—"

In sudden fury, in which dream and reality seemed to have switched places, Ronnie kicked hard, and with his free hand swung his bag with all his strength. A quick jerk, and he twisted loose. In seconds he had scrambled down a ladder to the first deck, and was racing forward to where a cargo net had just been rigged.

By the time he reached the startled winch operator he had money in his hand. It was enough money to open any stevedore's eyes, and before the unloading gang quite realized what was happening, Ronnie

had jumped into the net and was being swung over the vessel's side.

As the busy dock came up to meet him, he glanced back toward the men who had been watching for him. They were still there, but nearly two hundred feet away now. With so much activity going on, it seemed unlikely that they would catch sight of him from this distance. But suddenly the shorter man glanced up, went rigid, then snatched a weapon from under his shirt.

This was the moment of terror when the dream had ended.

Only, he was facing the real thing now, and the terror continued. For all at once the net stopped moving, and he found himself suspended in midair, a perfect target.

It was only for seconds, while a moving truck crept past to the loading zone. In those seconds Ronnie felt himself turning to ice. But the expected shot failed to come. The man with the weapon, strangely, seemed to be having difficulty pointing it at him.

Could it be that Ana María Rosalita was actually able to protect him?

As the net started to move again he caught a vague glimpse of her, standing back in the shadow within the building. Then his feet touched the dock, and in the next instant he was clawing his way out of the net and running.

He dodged past stacks of boxes and a moving truck, darted into the warehouse, and slowed for a quick look over his shoulder. The man with the weapon was no longer in range of his vision, but he caught sight of the Señora and saw her strike the small figure beside her. It was a vicious blow that must have caught the tiny girl entirely off guard, for it sent her staggering to the floor.

Ronnie gasped and stopped, his free hand clenching in a sudden flare of hate. Then he was aware of movement toward him out of the corner of his eye, and he whirled and began racing away between the piles of freight.

There were two ways out to the distant street, as he had learned from a chart of the warehouse area in the captain's office. His best chance, he decided, was to avoid the main entrance and dodge around to the side gate, which was hidden beyond mounds of building supplies.

It took long anxious minutes even to bring the side gate in sight. By the time he was through it, and had made his way to the street, his sweat-soaked shirt was clinging to him and he was gasping for breath. Nor was it just a street he now found himself on, but a roaring avenue jammed with traffic.

Desperately he began trotting along the edge of it, watching for an empty cab. The first five rushed past, ignoring him. But the sixth saw him in time to slow down and stop, and he scrambled gratefully

inside.

"Take me to—to Arecibo," he said finally, when he could find breath to speak.

6
MARLOWE

FROM HIS BRIEF STUDY of the road map the captain had given him, Ronnie guessed Arecibo to be about fifty miles to the west, or roughly halfway to the Beach of the Three Brothers. It was a fairly large town, he knew, so it ought to be a good place to switch cabs. The next most likely spot for a change would be Aguadilla, on the west coast.

There were a number of smaller towns, but it seemed better to avoid these. The fewer the people where he stopped, the greater the chance of being noticed and remembered. With three searchers after him, not counting Josip, things were bad enough already. Especially when one of the three happened to be Peter Pushkin.

Ronnie's hand trembled as he found his handkerchief and began mopping his hot face. Peter! The only seemingly false note in last night's dream had been Peter's appearance in it. But the sudden reality of Peter, striding across the dock in disguise, had given him a jolt he would feel for a long time.

Or maybe the present, neatly trimmed person was the real Peter, and the red-bearded tutor had been a disguise. It seemed more likely. But why would a disguised Peter Pushkin take a job as tutor to the Blue Boy? Why?

Why had Peter allowed the company to offer such a huge reward when he knew it would put the Blue Boy in danger? And why had Peter been so conveniently absent that terrible night at the hotel? Yes, and what was he doing on the dock at the same time with the two gunmen? Did it just happen that way?

After his exertion in the heat, Ronnie's head had begun to itch annoyingly under the wig, but he forgot it momentarily under a chilling new thought.

There was a simple, easy, and speedy way the Blue Boy could be found and caught. All the hundreds of police stations throughout Puerto Rico were under the head of the main station in San Juan. Peter had only to go to the main station, tell the right kind of a story, and in a few minutes every police car on the island would be watching for a cab carrying the runaway Blue Boy.

But did Peter know this?

With his eye on the driver, Ronnie loosened his wig and ran an

unsteady hand through his hair. It helped only briefly. Then he tried to ignore his discomfort by concentrating on the road ahead. They were out of San Juan now, going through lush, mountainous country that made him think of Hawaii. He had thought the traffic would ease a little with the city behind them, but if anything, it was worse and the pace even madder. Suddenly his attention went to the curious little cone-shaped mountains rising close on either side. They were in the haystack hills.

Almost instantly his eye was caught by a white slash in the jungle-covered side of the nearest cone. It was a large shallow cave, and the white was the exposed limestone. In the next few minutes he counted nearly a dozen such caves, and realized there must be hundreds of them in the region.

Could Black Luis be hiding in such a cave?

He was still thinking about this a half hour later, and wondering about Marlowe, when the cab roared over a series of bridges and came to an abrupt stop on the edge of a sprawling town.

That this was Arecibo he knew without asking, for he had glimpsed the name on a sign farther back. But something seemed to be holding up traffic in the distance.

"What's wrong ahead?" he asked uneasily.

"We'll never know," the driver said, shrugging. "It is the police again. They stop us and look us over once in a while, but they tell us nothing. They like their little secrets. But it could be Communists."

"Communists?" said Ronnie, hurriedly reaching for his money.

"Yes. They come from Santo Domingo, do their wickedness, and go back this way to maybe escape on a boat at Aguadilla."

Ronnie pressed the fare and a generous tip into the driver's hand, and reached for the door. "I think I'll walk the rest of the way. It's only a block or two."

The man winked. "You don't like the police, eh?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," said Ronnie, winking back. "It's just that I'm a Communist, a very dangerous one, and I've orders to blow up all the police stations on the island."

"Good! A worthy task! And if the police should ask me, I will tell them only that my fare was a student, home on vacation. I will not mention that I picked him up near the docks, and that his face was very pale for an islander."

Ronnie hastily plucked another bill from his pocket and thrust it into the other's hand. "Thank you, friend. You must not frighten the poor police. My paleness is caused by a dreadful disease, and I've just escaped from the most unspeakable place—"

"Get along with you!" chuckled the driver, and Ronnie slipped gratefully away and hurried down a narrow, balconied side street

away from the traffic.

The police might not be looking for the Blue Boy, but it was a chance he couldn't take. Cold-eyed Peter should not be underestimated, ever.

Around the corner on the next street, Ronnie paused in the shade under an overhanging window covered with grillwork and considered what to do. When he was in San Juan in January he had wanted badly to visit Arecibo and see the giant radio-telescope in the mountains on the other side of town. But there hadn't been time. He had a new film to make, studies to finish, and engagements waiting in Miami, New York, and Buenos Aires. Now here he was actually in Arecibo, and still there was no possibility of gratifying one of his greatest wishes. At the moment it was of far more importance that he do something about his furiously itching scalp, which had suddenly become unbearable. And he was thirsty. All the way from San Juan his thirst had been growing. When he had soothed his burning head, he wanted to sit in a cool place and drink tall frosted glasses of ice-cold water.

It was the memory of a paragraph he had read about a well-known café here that drove him doggedly up the hot street, then back over the main route. He found the café on the corner, and studied it a moment before entering, noting that it had a side entrance opening upon a parking lot where cabs could be hired. Inside he hesitated, knowing he was taking a risk. Everyone crossing the island stopped here. Surely Peter would, if he came in this direction.

But his parched throat and the blessed coolness from air conditioning lured him on. He went into the lavatory first, and washed his hot face and managed to partially cool his burning scalp. Then he found a seat at the long serpentine counter. The place was crowded, even though it was now the middle of the afternoon, and every waiter was rushed. When one finally came, he ordered a lime drink, for which he suddenly had a craving, and a glass of ice water.

"And please," he begged, "bring the water first."

The waiter brought the drink first, and apparently forgot him. Ronnie took an eager swallow from the too-green mixture in the glass, and set it down, revolted. Instead of being made from fresh limes, which grew all over the island, it was artificially flavored. And worse, it was sickeningly sweet.

All this time he had been keeping a wary eye on the entrance. Now he glimpsed a short, slender figure coming into the crowded foyer. He went rigid and stared. It looked like Josip, but with so many people between them he couldn't be sure. Then he made out the man's bristling yellow hair, and part of his face. It *was* Josip.

In his sudden wave of rage, frustration, and despair, Ronnie almost cried out and jumped from his seat. His first inclination was to defy

Josip. But almost instantly his very logical mind was cutting through emotion, seeing the dangers, and deciding on the best course to avoid them. In the next breath he was forcing himself to swallow more of the unpleasant lime drink while he drew money from his pocket and tossed it on the counter. Then, bag in hand and head lowered, he was off the stool and moving swiftly to the side door.

In the parking lot he started for the nearest taxi, but abruptly changed his mind when he saw an island bus taking on passengers. He raced to it and barely managed to get aboard before it pulled away.

Paying his way to Mayagüez, he settled down in a rear seat and tried to compose himself. The more he thought about it, the more certain he became that Josip had seen him leave the dock area, and had managed to catch a cab in time to follow him. The steward's job, he knew, was only temporary, and Josip was due to leave the ship at San Juan. Ordinarily such a man would have stayed in the city. But here he was in Arecibo, which meant he must have taken a cab to get here. Would Josip have spent the money to come this far by cab unless he had visions of reward?

Suddenly Ronnie was dismayed by another thought. What if Josip had run into Peter on the ship, and made a deal with him? It was entirely possible.

Ronnie began to regret his impulse to get on the bus. At first it had seemed safer, for passengers on a crowded bus are seldom remembered. But suppose Josip, or someone with Josip, had seen him dash outside and jump aboard?

He was even more dismayed to discover that the bus was a local, and made every stop along the way. Long later, when it rumbled into the little seaport of Aguadilla, he would have changed to a cab had one been in evidence. He was tempted to get out and search for one and find a drink of water as well, but some instinct made him stay aboard.

Presently, glancing back out of the rear window, he made an unpleasant discovery. The bus was being followed.

Ronnie studied the following car for some time, hoping it would come close enough to give him a better look at the driver. But it never did. Other cars passed, but this one lagged behind; when the bus made a stop it pulled to the side of the road and waited until the bus was on its way again.

Finally Ronnie hunched down in his seat, and began gnawing unhappily on his lip while he considered this new situation. The following car wasn't a taxi. If it was a rental job, Josip couldn't be driving, because it would have been impossible to rent a car so quickly after leaving the ship. The two gunmen could be in it, but more likely it was Peter at the wheel. And Josip could be with him,

acting as a guide.

How was he going to leave the bus without being seen?

His best chance, he reasoned, would be to ride on in to Mayagüez, then take a cab back to the area of the captain's cottage. Only, it would be dark by the time he returned. How could he ever find Black Luis' last beehive at night?

At that moment, peering ahead at the road curving to the right around endless cane fields, he glimpsed the sea again in place of the mountains he expected to find there. The mountains were to the left. Suddenly he realized the bus was not following the main route to Mayagüez, as he remembered it on the map. Instead it was circling around a great headland to take in several little coastal towns. As he closed his eyes and visualized the map, he saw that soon he would be going through Rincón and Córcega, and that shortly afterward he would actually be passing by the captain's cottage and the Beach of the Three Brothers.

This tantalizing fact, which had escaped him until now, brought him upright in his seat, a plan forming in his mind.

At the first stop past Rincón, depending on the position of the bus and the size of the crowd around it, he would slip off and try to make it to the nearest cover. His followers wouldn't be expecting that, and his smallness would be a great advantage. If he could reach a cane field or a bit of woods unseen, he would be safe.

They were finally past Rincón, and the bus was slowing when abruptly it began to rain. It roared straight down as the bus stopped at a hut near the side of the road. The small crowd of onlookers ran laughing for shelter. Ronnie, who had started to get off behind one of the passengers, retreated hastily to his seat. The following car, dim in the downpour, had crept much closer this time.

Ronnie had long been aware that the high mountains were lost in clouds, but he had thought nothing of it. And though he had been in the tropics, he had no idea what a tropical rain can be like, even after the rainy season is supposed to be over.

It slackened for a while, so that he could make out the following car. Then it began to pour in earnest. Windows came down in the bus, and the interior was suddenly stifling. The car behind them became invisible until the next stop, when it drew up so close that leaving in front of it was unthinkable.

Ronnie despaired. But even as the bus got under way again, he was almost frantically considering and discarding new plans. The thought of being forced to stay aboard until Mayagüez was suddenly frightening. But what could he do in such a rain as this?

He had never seen anything like it, and would not have believed it could pour any harder. But all at once, incredibly, it turned into a

thundering deluge that obliterated everything from sight. The bus slowed, crept to the side of the road, and stopped.

It took Ronnie only an instant to realize this was his chance, but he sat motionless for five long, tense seconds before he could fight down his terror of what he had to do. Then he jumped from his seat and ran to the front of the bus.

"Quick!" he cried. "Let me out!"

The driver eyed him in astonishment. "Are you crazy?"

"I've *got* to get out!" Ronnie almost shrieked. "Hurry!"

"You must be demented. In that case, perhaps it is better to have you out than in." The driver shrugged and opened the door.

Ronnie swallowed and stepped forth into the deluge.

It was like plunging into a roaring cataract, and he was instantly soaked. The bus vanished completely after the first two steps and he had to feel his way off the road. Then his feet slipped in mud, and he went tumbling down a slope he would not have believed was there. Somehow he managed to cling to his bag, which cushioned the shock when his downward progress was abruptly stopped by a tree. Fear drove him blindly on. It was only after he had groped through a tangle of tropical growth to an open space that he began to feel safe.

He stopped, tore off his glasses and the hated wig, and raised his head to the slashing rain. Never had water felt so pleasantly cool, or tasted so good as it poured down his throat. He drank his fill standing. Finally he removed most of his clothes and held them out in his hands until they were washed clean. When the rain slackened he put them on again, and tucked the wig under his belt. He could make out his surroundings now, and he started hesitantly forward.

After a few yards he stopped, uncertain. The sea had to be somewhere ahead, but he was in up-and-down country and rising directly in front of him was a jungle-covered slope. Then he made out a bamboo fence on the right, and a vague path beside it. Eagerly he followed the path for a while, only to come to an abrupt halt at the sight of huts beyond the fence.

To be seen by anyone now was to be remembered, and that could be extremely dangerous. For when Peter, or whoever was in the car, discovered he was not on the bus at Mayagüez, the search would surely swing back in this direction. Every poor *jíbaro*, or farm worker, in the area would be questioned.

Ronnie carefully retraced his steps. There seemed to be only one other way to go, and that was up a winding path climbing a ridge on the left. With some misgivings he started upward.

By the time he reached the crest the rain had stopped and the sun was struggling to break through the clouds ahead. He gasped, for the

sea lay directly in front of him. From this height it seemed to be almost at his feet. A distant plume of factory smoke marked the city of Mayagüez, far off to the left. On the right—

He stiffened as a perfect beehive shape took form in the clearing mist. It was at the very end of the ridge on which he stood, and it was the only such shape to be seen.

The sight of it sent him hurrying breathlessly down the path on the western side of the ridge.

The last beehive—for surely it could be nothing else—was farther away than it had first appeared. Long after he reached the rocky beach he was still struggling to get to it before the sun went down. Once the sea had swallowed the sun, the tropic night would follow swiftly. The thought of being caught here in the dark, all alone, was a little frightening.

He was almost at the base of the beehive when he found the way blocked by a tidal creek overgrown with mangroves. At the sight of the black water and the tangled growth in it, his courage almost deserted him. Then, noticing the sand bar in the clear salt water beyond the mouth of the place, he waded grimly out to it and circled to the other side.

Hardly a minute's walk farther on, near the edge of a tiny sandy beach, he found the sea grape tree.

That it was a sea grape he knew instantly by its round leaves, and spreading foliage above a low, gnarled trunk. It was the biggest sea grape he had ever seen, and unquestionably the one Ana María Rosalita had told him about. For it was hollow, and in the hollow were a coil of new fishing line and a package of hooks, and what seemed to be a message scrawled upon a scrap of wrapping paper.

In sudden rising excitement Ronnie turned and stared at the little mountain he had come so far to find. The only sign of a cave was the familiar white of exposed limestone showing through the tropic growth about a hundred feet up. It was too shallow a spot to give protection to anyone or form a hiding place. Then, to the left of the mountain, a broken fence caught his attention. On the higher ground beyond it, in a ruined garden, the fire-blackened remains of a small dwelling protruded above brown and wilted banana stalks.

Ronnie studied the ruins. Frowning, he turned back to the beach. His excitement was changing to uneasiness. Something had happened here, something unpleasant. And it hadn't been very long ago. Where was Black Luis now?

The sun had already touched the horizon. Ronnie swallowed and sank down on a rock, wondering what to do.

It was the time for crickets and katydids to begin their evening chorus, but instead of anything familiar an entirely different sound

began to rise around him. He had been hearing it intermittently for the past hour, but had paid little attention to it. Now it swelled from all sides, growing in intensity as the sun slid into the sea—a high, liquid call from countless thousands of invisible throats: *co-kee! co-kee! co-keee! co-keee! ma-reee! co-keeee! ma-ree! co-keee!*

The very cheerfulness of it made him momentarily forget his troubles. He was wondering what sort of creatures could be making such a pleasant racket, when a curiously sharp little voice demanded, "What are you doing here, boy? Don't you know this is private property?"

Ronnie sprang to his feet and stared about him. There was no one in sight. In fact, there was not even a place anywhere near where a person could be hidden. Yet the voice had been very close.

"W-where are you?" he gulped.

"I'm asking the questions!" the voice snapped imperiously. "Answer me!"

"I—I'm looking for Black Luis," Ronnie stammered.

"Ha! And who told you you'd find him here?"

"Ana María Rosalita told me."

"Oh!" There was a silence, then the voice demanded, "Why did she tell you—and why are you looking for him?"

Ronnie ran his tongue over dry lips. This was the most incredible conversation he had ever had in his life. The voice seemed to be in constant movement, though it was never more than a few paces away. Yet he could see no one.

"Don't stand there like a dummy," the voice said sharply. "Speak up!"

"It—it's a little hard speaking to an invisible person who keeps moving around me. Are—are you Marlowe?"

"Who told you my name?"

"Ana María Rosalita. She said if I came here, you'd see me and take me to Black Luis. I—I've got to find a place a hide."

"From what? Are you a lawbreaker?"

"No. But there are people who want to do me in because they think I know too much. I—I'm Ronnie Cleveland, the Blue Boy."

"Ulp! Say that again? The *Blue Boy*?"

"Yes. I met Ana María Rosalita on the boat that brought us from New Orleans. She helped me get away. She—"

"*¡Madre mía!* She's back already? On the *Cristobal Colón?*"

"Yes. We docked early this afternoon. We—"

"Praise be! Oh, it will be so good to see her again! I can't begin to tell you how we've felt here, with her so far away. She wrote she was coming back, but we didn't know when the boat.... Oh, I must tell Black Luis—" The voice, breathless and excited, broke off abruptly.

There was a pause, then it snapped coldly, “But how do I know you’re the Blue Boy? Can you prove it?”

“Haven’t you ever seen a picture of me?”

“No. I’ve never been interested in entertainers.”

“Then look at my hair,” Ronnie ground out. “I’ve been hiding it under a wig so I wouldn’t be recognized. But the wig’s off now. Can’t you see the color of it?”

There was a moment’s silence. Suddenly the voice exclaimed, “*¡Hombre!* It *is* blue! I thought it was just the evening light on it. Name of a name, you really *are* the Blue Boy!”

“Right now,” Ronnie muttered, “I sure wish I weren’t.” Then he added a little desperately, “Please, I—I’ve had about all I can take today. I’ve been chased and someone tried to shoot me, and I’ve been followed all the way from San Juan. I just managed to escape off the bus and run away in the rain. I’ve finally reached the end of nowhere, and now I’m forced to talk to an—an invisible something—”

“You’re *not* at the end of nowhere,” the sharp voice interrupted. “You’re at the beginning of somewhere. And don’t think you’re the only one with troubles. We have them too. What’s more, I’m *not* an invisible something. I happen to be entirely visible, and much too exposed for comfort. That’s bad enough. But on top of it you’re trying to make me reveal a secret known only to two people, and I’m not liking it a bit.”

“But—but what—”

“No! I’ll *not* reveal it! You know too much already. You may call me Marlowe, but don’t ask any questions about me. If you want to see Black Luis, turn around and face the mountain, and start walking. I’ll tell you where to go.”

Ronnie felt a cold prickling at the back of his neck. He swallowed and picked up his bag. “I—I saw some things that must have been left for you two in that hollow tree. Don’t you want to get them first?”

“*You* get them,” Marlowe ordered. “Then head for the mountain. Do exactly as I tell you, and *don’t look back!*”

7
BLACK LUIS

IT HAD BEEN A VERY BAD DAY. Though Ronnie had experienced worse ones, none had been so strangely jolting. The horribly real dream, and the following reality of it, had been hard enough to take. Such things just don't happen to intelligent people with level heads. The fact that they had happened was evidence that he must have a cog loose somewhere. Of course he hadn't swallowed any of that silly stuff which poor Ana María Rosalita was all wrapped up in, so he felt the cog couldn't have slipped too much. But with this final offering of the day he wasn't so sure.

As he took the things from the tree, he tried to steal careful glances from the corners of his eyes, but he saw no more than he had before. No one was in sight. And few creatures but a chipmunk could have managed to hide behind the dappled rocks that littered the area just above the beach. There were no chipmunks on the island, and the only wild animal, he remembered, was the mongoose, which had been imported from India. He had never heard of a chipmunk that could talk, and he doubted if a mongoose would be any better at it.

That left birds and ventriloquists. Parrots lived in the mountains here, but it was beyond him to credit even the smartest parrot with Marlowe's intelligence. Birds—and that included mynah birds—just didn't have it.

As for ventriloquists …

Ronnie slipped the coil of fishing line over his shoulder, and thrust the hooks and the note into a pocket of his nearly dry trousers. Then, bag in hand, he turned toward the mountain, his ears alert for any small sound around him.

He had hardly taken three steps when Marlowe's voice came from a spot directly behind him, apparently from the tree he had just left. "Head for that clump of bamboo," Marlowe ordered. "Turn to the right behind it, and you'll find steps." Then, as he faltered, the voice sharpened and almost shrieked, "Keep going, Blue Boy! Keep going, and don't you dare turn around. You've no time to waste. Can't you see that it will soon be dark?"

Ronnie fought down the temptation to whirl and stare at the tree. He had already examined it carefully while taking the things out of

the hollow. Marlowe wasn't there. The very impossibility of the voice speaking from the tree brought a colder prickling at his neck and down his spine.

A ventriloquist? No. Unless one actually *had* learned to throw his voice, as so many people still seemed to think.

He reached the bamboo and hesitated again, but a sharp word from Marlowe drove him behind it, and through an almost imperceptible opening in the foliage. The deepening blaze of evening color barely penetrated the thick canopy of leaves, but presently he made out the steps leading upward. They had been cut directly into the limestone and obviously were very old. All of them were eroded and broken, and many were hidden entirely by the matted roots of trees. From the angle of the climb he guessed they were headed for the exposed patch of rock he had noticed earlier.

They were. Ronnie came out suddenly upon a broad shelf, much larger than he had expected to find. Everything about it showed the hand of man—but of man long past. The crumbled protective wall around the edge had originally been made of carefully cut stone, and once seats of stone had lined the inside, but only a few of these were still usable. Of present-day man the only signs were the remains of a fire in a sheltered corner, and a large calabash full of fresh rainwater from the afternoon's deluge.

"Wait here," came the voice of Marlowe from some indefinite spot in the tangle ahead.

Ronnie sank wearily down on the nearest seat and peered about with some astonishment. Mango trees loaded with green fruit framed a fantastic view of the darkening sea. Above him oranges were growing wild, and below he could make out the broad leaves of plantains and bananas. With fish from the sea, he thought, Marlowe and Black Luis should have little trouble living here. Only, where did they sleep? Surely not on this open shelf.

His wonderings were interrupted by approaching voices. Suddenly, as if materializing from the gathering night, the long, lean form of a black boy slid from the shadows on the other side of the shelf. He wore only sandals and ragged shorts made from an old pair of blue jeans, and he was the blackest person Ronnie had ever seen. Even his lips were dark, and, like all his thin and strangely handsome features, they seemed to have been very carefully carved from ebony.

"*¡Hola!*" he greeted. "I am Black Luis."

"*¡Hola!*" said Ronnie, rising slowly. "I am Ronnie Cleveland."

"I've seen your pictures. I recognize you. Marlowe says you're in trouble. He says Ana María Rosalita sent you here." He spoke jerkily in a sharp voice, mixing English and Spanish just as Marlowe did. There was something oddly familiar in the way he pronounced an

English phrase.

Ronnie replied easily in the same mixture of languages. “Yes,” he said. “—I’ve got to have a safe place to hide. I’ve plenty of money. I’ll pay—” He stopped quickly, seeing that the mention of money was a mistake. The long eyes of the black boy had narrowed, and the thin face had tightened. From somewhere in the shadows the unseen Marlowe spat out, “Money!” as if it were the ugliest word ever devised by man.

Black Luis said, “Money is not wanted here. If you are a friend of Ana María Rosalita, that is enough. Her friends are our friends. We share what we have. Come.”

“Just a minute,” said Ronnie, slipping the coil of fishing line from his shoulder and reaching into his pocket for the hooks and the scrap of wrapping paper. “Here are some things I brought from your mailbox. I thought the note might be important.”

Line and hooks were received with an understandable eagerness, but the scrawled note brought a frown. The black boy squinted at it in the fading light. “It is from Nicky Robles, my friend up at the beach.” He shook his head. “I cannot make it out now. But Nicky never sends good news. So this has to be bad.”

Ronnie dug quickly into his bag, found his flashlight, and turned it on. It was instantly snatched away and turned off.

“Never show a light up here!” Black Luis warned. “Never! It can be seen for miles.” He went to a corner behind a bench, spread the note on the stone floor, and read the message with the light carefully shielded by his hands and body. “*Por supuesto*” he muttered. “I might have known it.”

“Is it—very bad?” Ronnie asked.

“Bad enough. But you do bring us good news along with the bad. It helps to know that we will see Ana María Rosalita again, though she must have told you it is dangerous for her to return. She is in trouble too.” The black boy sighed. “Now Nicky tells me that the officials will come to search for me. Tomorrow. The police and the immigration people. I am not wanted here. I am what they call an—an undesirable alien. If they catch me, I will be deported.”

“Ha!” Marlowe exclaimed. “*If* they catch you. That’ll be the day!”

“But I can’t stay here forever. Not with the way things have been going.”

Ronnie said, “Are you really an alien?”

“I—I don’t know for sure. Only Don Carlos, Ana María Rosalita’s father, knew the truth about that.”

“But surely there’s a record—”

“Save it,” Marlowe interrupted sharply. “We’d better get him inside, *marinero*, before it gets too dark for him to see, since we can’t show a

light."

"Then let's go. Follow me close, Blue Boy."

To Ronnie, black dark came the instant they left the shelf and began crawling through the tangle. He could only feel his way along, guided by Black Luis' feet and an occasional word from Marlowe. Every time he groped forward over the matted roots his stomach contracted, and he chilled with the fear of the unknown tropical horror his fingers might touch: scorpions, centipedes, snakes.…

"Do—do you have any bad snakes here?" he asked once.

His question brought an instant chuckle from Black Luis. "Not on *this* mountain, Blue Boy. You won't find much of anything here that will bite, not even a mosquito. Anyway, there are no poisonous snakes on the island."

"Oh. I didn't know. I—I've never been in a place like this before. To tell the truth, this is the first time I was ever in the woods."

"Don't kid me, white feller."

"I'm not kidding you. I've always lived in cities. I never had a chance to get out before."

"I lived in a city once, but I sure got out."

"Where was that?"

"New York. In that part they call Harlem. That's where I learned to speak English. Oh, I had it in school in Córcega. But Harlem's the place where I learned to use it. They got a real school there for teaching Spanish-speaking kids."

So that was why the black boy's pronunciation had seemed so familiar. "Harlem," Ronnie said quietly, "is where I first learned to speak Spanish."

"No!" Movement ahead stopped. "You're putting me on, white feller. What were *you* ever doing in a place like *Harlem?*"

"Trying to stay alive."

"Go on! The Blue Boy never had to worry about keeping his belly full."

"I wasn't the Blue Boy then. I never knew my people, if I ever had any. About the first thing I can remember was crawling down an alley, hungry. An old black woman took me in. She used to steal so we could eat. All she had to give me that first day was some dry bread soaked in water, with a little sugar on it. Did that ever taste good!"

"*¡Hombre!* I never had it that bad."

There was a silence. Then Black Luis said, "My mamma died early, but I had the best papa anywhere to look after me till he was killed in an accident. We lived in that house down below us that was burned. Did you notice it?"

"Yes. What happened there?"

Before the black boy could answer, Marlowe cried, "That

unspeakable Bernardo put a match to it! With his own hands! Oh, how I would like to see Ana María Rosalita give him warts—"

"*¡Quieto!* We'll talk about him later." To Ronnie he said, "We're at the door. I'll lift the vines out of the way and hold the light. You crawl in first."

The light stabbed into a narrow black tunnel under the vines. The mere thought of entering it made Ronnie shudder, but he gathered his courage and did as he was told. When he was finally able to stand erect and look around, he was astonished to discover that he was in a large cave, clean, dry, and pleasantly cool. Nor was it an ordinary cavern of eroded limestone, such as he had glimpsed during the afternoon. In the beginning, no doubt, it had been just that. But in some distant past man had smoothed the walls and leveled the floor; then he had carved extra rooms and grottoes, and decorated it all with symbolic designs of birds and fish chiseled into the rock. Finally—and Ronnie found this equally astonishing—modern man had furnished it with a variety of odds and ends and actually succeeded in making it homelike.

Lanterns, ancient and modern, hung about the walls. Only one was lighted, and by its feeble glow he could make out chairs and an ancient table of carved wood, a cot with what seemed to be a hand-woven cover, and some built-in bookshelves jammed with old books. A net hammock hung in a corner between stout metal hooks driven into the rock. At an angle to the right of it was a man-made alcove obviously used as a kitchen. Beyond it, in a larger alcove, the lantern light glinted faintly on the ornate post of an old bed. The region on the other side of it was lost in darkness.

"What I have is yours," Black Luis said, and now there was more than mere politeness in his voice. "Make yourself at home."

"Thank you," said Ronnie, peering about in wonder. "This is some place. Did you just find it, or what?"

"Oh, we've always sort of known about it. I mean, Marlowe and I, and his ancestors and mine. The *indios* used it before the Spanish came. This country's full of caves. Most of them are known, but the Spanish never learned of ours. Did Ana María Rosalita tell you about it?"

"She said you'd gone underground."

"Well, she knows of it, though she's never seen it. We've never used it except as a hiding place. My grandpapa got in trouble once, and hid in here for two years. He's the one who fixed it up the way it is now. Worked in here all day and came out only at night to pick fruit or catch fish. That's how *we* have to live." Black Luis gave a short, bitter laugh, then added, "But we won't be able to hide here much longer. A few more weeks …" He shrugged.

Ronnie stared at him. “What’s going on? Besides what’s happening tomorrow, I mean.”

“Tomorrow is part of it. It belongs to the same string of trouble. The string is being tightened all around us. Soon it will squeeze us out.”

“And Bernardo is the one who’s pulling the string?”

“Who else? But don’t ask me why. It makes no sense. It is a crazy thing.” Black Luis sighed. “I am not afraid for myself. I would hate to lose this place, yes. But it is no great matter. I can get lost and manage somehow. The big worry is that the same string is tightening around Ana María Rosalita. That is what scares me.”

“It scares me too,” said Ronnie, remembering how viciously the Señora had struck her after leaving the boat. “She told me she’d run away, if things got bad, and come here. She won’t let them take her back to Santo Domingo.”

“But that is their plan! I know!” The black boy pounded his fists together. “They would get rid of us both. My grapevine is good. Marlowe gets around. What he misses, I get from Nicky Robles. His sister works at Las Alturas. That’s the old Montoya villa where Don Bernardo is living now. I don’t know how Ana María Rosalita can get out of that place—”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s built on the side of the mountain, like a fort. Anyway, it would be just like that dirty *bribón* to lock her in her room.”

“Then we’ll go and get her out,” Ronnie told him.

“If you think that would be easy—”

“Nothing is easy on an empty stomach,” Marlowe interrupted from the darkness of the entrance. “It is past time to eat, *marinero*, which means it is no time to talk of troubles and make plans. The Blue Boy’s about had it today. Didn’t he tell you someone’s been trying to kill him ever since he reached San Juan?”

“*¡Madre!*” the black boy exclaimed. “Who would want to do a thing like that? Sit down. Tell me about it while I bring the supper.”

“I have his dessert,” Marlowe called. “I’ve just picked it.”

A red and gold object the size of two teacups rolled out of the darkness and skittered across the stone toward the table. The aroma of it instantly filled the cave.

Ronnie caught it up and held it in the light. “A mango!” he exclaimed. “A ripe one!”

“Of course it’s ripe!” Marlowe said tartly. “Did you think I’d be scummy enough to offer you a green one?”

“No, but—I mean—”

“I’ve heard how the Blue Boy goes for mangoes,” said the voice from the dark. “So I thought I’d get you an extra-special one. Bet you never saw any like it!”

"No," Ronnie replied, his wonder growing. "I never did." His fondness for mangoes had been well publicized, but almost no one realized how much knowledge he had acquired about the subject. This mango was not only out of season, but it didn't even belong here. In fact, he couldn't think of any place it did belong.

"I—I certainly appreciate it," he managed to say. "It's hard to believe you just picked it."

"But I did! Not two minutes ago!"

"You didn't pick it from any of those trees I saw outside."

"Well, not exactly," Marlowe admitted. "It came from one of the others."

"*What* others?"

"Oh, don't be so nosy! Can't you just accept a good thing when it's given to you?"

"But, Marlowe, I can't help wondering. I—I know this is extra special. That's why I'm so interested. W—won't you come out and show yourself, so I can thank you in person?"

"Absolutely not! You just want to satisfy your overgrown curiosity. You'll accept me as I am, or not at all."

"But I've already accepted you—"

"Not for what I am! I'm really a ghost. That's why I can't show myself."

"But you're *not* a ghost," Ronnie persisted. "I know better! In fact—"

"I am too a ghost!" Marlowe snapped. "I was even named for a ghost. If you don't believe it, ask Black Luis."

Ronnie glanced at the suddenly grinning Negro, who was placing baked yams and hunks of cold fish wrapped in banana leaves on the table. "People around here think he's a ghost," said Black Luis. "When they hear him and can't see him, they run. I mean, they *run*." Black Luis chuckled. "But you didn't run. You're the first person I know who didn't."

"I wanted to," Ronnie confessed. "But I couldn't afford to. I had to find a place to hide."

There was a sudden silence. Then Marlowe said in a puzzled tone, "I can't understand why anybody would want to hurt the Blue Boy. It doesn't make sense."

There were a lot of things around here, Ronnie thought, that didn't make sense. Bernardo's tightening string was crazy enough. And Marlowe, to put it mildly, had given him a walloping jolt. Even now, when he had finally begun to suspect what Marlowe could be, it was hard to believe.

But the thing that made the least sense of all was the mango.

He placed the incredible fruit on the table before him, then started in hungrily on the fish. Between bites he said, "I had to run away

because somebody thinks I know too much. The trouble started in New Orleans.…”

While he told what had happened to him, part of his mind centered on the mango. It was impossible, because it couldn’t have grown here. There wouldn’t be a ripe mango on the island until next spring, and that was months away. Yet here was a ripe one, finer than any he had ever seen, so fresh from the tree that the dew was still on it.

Where did Marlowe get it?

8
HAUNTED MOUNTAIN

RONNIE AWOKE SUDDENLY in the night, shaken by a dream as frighteningly real as the one he had had on the ship. He was sliding and plunging downward through wet jungle growth in absolute blackness. There was an instant of horror when he lost contact with Ana María Rosalita behind him, and Black Luis ahead, and abruptly began to fall, down, down, down.…

The dream had neither beginning nor end, but the terrible reality of it brought him upright on the cot where he had been asleep, to stare wildly around at his unfamiliar surroundings. Then, in the dim light of the lantern, he saw the half-eaten mango on the table. Instantly everything fell into place.

He sank back, trying to forget the dream, and wished he could have gone fishing with Black Luis. He had never been fishing in his life. But until he knew more about the area and had learned to find his way around in the dark, it had been agreed that it would be better if he remained out of sight.

"This island's crawling with people," Black Luis told him before leaving. "You may not see them, but if they happen to be watching, they'll see you. And they'll see you for sure if there's money in it for them."

It was something of a shock to realize that the price of safety was to become a voluntary prisoner in a cave. But there wasn't the slightest doubt that Peter, or whoever it was that had followed him so far, would be able to trace him to the spot where he had left the bus in the rain. The search would broaden. Soon every person living for miles around would be on the watch for him.

"It's the same with me," the black boy added. "Everybody around here works for Don Bernardo. Either in the cane or the coffee. They call themselves my friends. Ha! You could buy half of them for ten dollars. They keep Don Bernardo informed. Last month one of them saw me in my papa's old house. Next day Don Bernardo came and burned the place down, then smashed the pump at the well."

"But why?"

"Lots of reasons. Claimed it belonged to him. Claimed Don Carlos never really gave me the place. Claimed I was an—an undesirable

alien and didn't want me hanging around. Told people if I didn't have water and a roof, I'd have to go back where I belonged. Well, I've got water and a roof he doesn't know about. It's all on my own property."

"If Don Carlos gave it to you, surely you have a deed to prove it."

"Of course he has a deed!" Marlowe exclaimed from the shadows. "It's in that tin box on the shelf. I'll bet that dirty *bribón* burned the house thinking he'd burn the deed with it."

"That wouldn't make much difference," he told them. "Deeds have to be registered. With a good lawyer—"

Lawyer, he instantly discovered, was a bad word, almost as bad as money. It brought a shriek of "Vulture!" from Marlowe, and dire mutterings from Black Luis. It developed that Black Luis actually had gone to a lawyer, the very man who had made out the deed in the first place, and who had often done work for Don Carlos.

"He told me to get lost," the black boy spat out. "He told me I was under age and an alien, and had no legal rights since I didn't have a guardian. And he told me I'd better get back to Santo Domingo where I belonged, and fast, before the immigration people caught me. Then he said Don Carlos had made a mistake in deeding me property, but that Don Bernardo felt sorry for me, and would be glad to give me a little cash for my claim. I told the dirty *diablo*—"

"But you went to the wrong lawyer! Can't you see? Don Carlos is dead, and he wants the Montoya business. So he'll do whatever Bernardo tells him. But the whole thing is crazy. Why does Bernardo want to drive you away and take your property? With what he's inherited, I'll bet he's one of the richest men in the islands! He's got *thousands* of acres! Why does he want this little piece?"

I can't figure it.

"But there *has* to be a reason. Tell me what happened. I mean, you said you'd lived in Harlem. Why did you leave and go to Santo Domingo? If I can hear the whole thing, maybe …"

"Well, when my papa died, I had nobody to look after me but an aunt. When she decided to live in New York, I had to go along."

"What about Marlowe?"

Marlowe grumbled, "Somebody had to stay behind and keep an eye on things. Anyhow, I wasn't wanted."

"I wanted you," Black Luis said. "But I wasn't allowed to take you. You know that. Anyway, when my aunt died, I wrote to Don Carlos in Santo Domingo and asked for a job. You see, my people had worked for him and his people for a hundred years. When he sent me the money to come down, I moved fast. *Madre*, was I glad to leave! I came here first and got Marlowe, then went on to Santo Domingo. Later, when the trouble came—"

"I know that part of it. But what happened after you got here with

Ana María Rosalita? Why did Don Carlos give you this particular piece of land? Did you ask for it?"

"Sure. But not until he said he was going to give me some land anyway. He said land reform was coming, and the government was going to take land from people like him and divide it up in little pieces for people like me. So he wanted me to have the best of it. When I picked this place—and I wanted it anyway because I was born here—he said I ought to choose a piece that was worth more, a piece I could raise a crop on to sell. But I said no, this place had everything. My papa once told me a man could live here naturally all his life, the way a man should live, and never be in need."

"Except for money."

"Money!" the black boy exclaimed. "It should never have been invented. My papa said it makes slaves of everyone!"

"But you have to have it."

Marlowe cried, "If people had the sense to live naturally, they wouldn't need it! In such impossible quantities, I mean."

"Look," said Black Luis, "if I treat this place right, it will give me money. It grows everything—oranges, limes, grapefruit, bananas, coconuts, mangoes, plantains, guavas, papayas, sapodillas, yes, and breadfruit even. And if all those fail me, I can get money from the sea. Right out there." He waved his arm. "Standing on the beach. I don't need a boat. The water is deep a few feet out. Very deep. It is so deep the *Cristobal Colón* could come right in and tie up at the sea grape tree where Nicky Robles leaves my mail."

"Really?"

"It is true. It is a valley, submerged. Two big vessels could come in there. And all the best fish around can be caught from the beach—snapper, grouper, bonito…."

Ronnie swung his feet to the floor and started to get up. Instead he sat thoughtfully on the edge of the cot, and again went over in his mind all that Black Luis had told him. He was almost certain now that he knew the answers to two important questions. Maybe three.

But knowing the truth, he realized, didn't solve anything. It wouldn't stop Bernardo, and it didn't help Ana María Rosalita in the slightest. But first things first. If he could prove one of the answers—the truth about Black Luis' citizenship—it might save their hiding place for a while and give them time to make further plans.

But the very first thing of all was to get Ana María Rosalita safely away from Bernardo's house.

He wished they could take a few extra days to scout the place, but a delay might be dangerous. What if the Señora decided to return to Santo Domingo earlier than expected?

He decided they had better go after Ana María Rosalita early tomorrow evening.

A glance at his wristwatch told him that Black Luis and Marlowe wouldn't be back for at least an hour, for it was hardly past midnight. He got up and went to the table, and touched the money he had spread out upon it to dry. The afternoon's deluge had soaked through his billfold and dampened everything in it. The bills were still damp. Reluctantly he left them as they were, and hoped that Black Luis wouldn't come back too soon and discover them.

Turning away, he caught sight of his zipper bag lying open on the floor at the foot of the cot. He got out his copy of *Time and Duality*, then tried to adjust the lantern so he could see to read. The lantern, he discovered, was almost out of oil. He soon found that all the other lanterns, as well as the several lamps, were empty. Frowning, he got his flashlight from the shelf where Black Luis had left it, and went in search of a fuel can.

He located the can and a rusty funnel in a storage niche just past the kitchen area. It was a small can, and he was dismayed to feel the lightness of it when he picked it up. Hardly a pint of oil remained in it. As he remembered what Ana María Rosalita had told him, he realized that anyone without money for stamps would hardly have enough for necessities.

Very carefully, so as not to spill a drop, he filled the lantern. But instead of turning up the wick, he lowered it until it gave barely enough light to see by. The remaining oil in the can would have to be rationed. Only Nicky Robles could safely buy more fuel for them, and that might take time.

It was thirst as much as curiosity that drew him into the rear passage when he found there was no water to drink in the kitchen area. After some fifty feet he stopped abruptly, surprised to see a flight of steps curving upward on the right. He was tempted to climb them, for as he played the light over them he could feel a steady draught of rising air; evidently the stairway acted as a ventilator, and led to some opening higher on the mountain.

Then, faintly, he heard water running somewhere ahead.

A few feet farther on he came to more steps cut into the rock, but these led downward. He descended for a short distance into a circular room where three small pools, raised above the floor and fed by a tiny spring dripped one into the other and flowed away in a narrow trench. The trench ended in a dark fissure in the floor that probably carried the drainage out to sea.

Ronnie glimpsed the carvings on the wall and guessed that the Indians, long ago, must have used this chamber and its pools for some sort of religious purpose. The place certainly solved a lot of problems

now. A cake of soap, a towel, and a blackened cooking pot by the lower pool indicated its present use. Beside the upper pool was a pewter mug, inviting one to drink.

It was the best water he had ever tasted. He washed in the middle pool and, refreshed, returned to his cot in the main part of the cave.

He did not feel in the least sleepy, and his intention was to put the money away as soon as it was dry, and think about Dr. Prynne's equations until Black Luis and Marlowe returned. He had never tried working any of the equations in his head. But, with his memory, there seemed to be no reason why he couldn't. Especially that last one, where he thought he had found a mistake.

Tonight, however, it was impossible to concentrate. New questions, and unanswered old ones, kept rising in his mind. Along with big questions, like the mystery of the mango, little ones clamored for solution. How did so much large furniture ever get into a place with such a small entrance? And what sort of creature was it that kept calling *co-kee! co-kee!?* Even in here he was aware of the countless voices that shook the dark outside.

The furniture, of course, must have been brought in through a larger opening, one now sealed over. And the night chorus, could it be that some kind of frog was making it?

But what of the mango?

It struck him suddenly that Dr. Prynne himself would have been mightily interested in where that mango came from.

He was still wondering about it when he fell asleep.

The unmistakable sound of men's voices, coming from somewhere near, jerked Ronnie awake.

He sat up quickly. The lantern still cast its feeble glow upon the table, but from a narrow recess in the wall beyond it came a shaft of pale daylight. Black Luis was standing there motionless, listening.

Ronnie swung off the cot and crept close. Seeing him, the black boy put a finger to his lips and pointed to a long, narrow crack extending at an angle through the rock at the back of the recess. Ronnie slipped into the place and put his eyes to the crack.

He was astonished to discover that he was looking down upon the flat shelf of rock where he had met Black Luis last evening. Almost directly below, hardly twenty feet away, two men were moving uncertainly about, talking.

One man, who wore the cap of an official, muttered, "See yonder? Someone's been here. They built a fire in that corner."

"Don Bernardo did that," the other grumbled.

"What for?"

"Oh, we found a pile of wood up here he thought the Luis boy

might be using, so he burned it along with the house."

"That Luis boy has really upset him. I wonder why?"

"Don't ask me. I just do as I'm told."

"Well, it's none of my business. My job is to catch the boy and deport him. Are there any more trails around here, and places to hide?"

"Not unless you're a mongoose. I've been all over this little mountain. It is full of holes, but there are none big enough to put your head in."

"Well, we'd better leave a man around to keep watch while we search over the ridge. The Luis boy may come back. Maybe after dark."

"You won't get anyone to stay here after the sun goes down."

"Why not?" the official asked sharply.

"The place is haunted."

"Nonsense!"

"Ask anyone around here! Every soul I know will tell you the same thing. If you come here in the evening, a voice will float all about you and warn you to leave. I have heard it myself."

"There must be a rational explanation for such a phenomenon."

"I've given you a rational explanation. The place is haunted. If you do not believe in the truth of such things, then you're not rational."

"Well, I've always said the spirits of the *indios* are still around. Perhaps we'd better leave."

Ronnie watched the men start down through the heavy growth, then glanced at Black Luis.

The black boy was grinning. "My grandpapa fixed this place. There was another entrance here once, but he changed it. I don't know how. It was long, long ago. He was a stoneworker, and very clever. Can you smell fish cooking?"

"No. Why?"

"I am cooking those I caught last night. In the stone oven my grandpapa built. But you cannot tell it because the smell goes up, up, high into the mountain. I think maybe the limestone cleans it. Outside I have climbed all the way to the mountain's top, and sniffed the holes where the air comes out. But I cannot smell fish when I cook them. My grandpapa was a smart man."

As he turned, the black boy's attention was caught by the money that still covered the table. He stiffened. "*¡Madre!*" he muttered. "So much wealth! I saw it last night when I came. Take it away!"

"We share and share alike," said Ronnie. "Part of it is yours."

"No! I want nothing to do with it. Money is evil."

"There's nothing evil about that money. I earned it. Every penny of it. If you earned five dollars by selling some fish, you wouldn't call it

evil, would you?"

"No, but there are thousands and thousands yoner—"

"Yes," Ronnie agreed, his mind working as swiftly as it had ever worked. "And if you'd sold thousands and thousands of fish, you'd have a pile just like it, and it would be just as evil. What's more, we're going to need every dollar of it before we're through. You're in trouble. I'm in trouble. Ana María Rosalita is in trouble. This money's going to help us all."

"I don't see how. I'd rather put my faith in some other things."

"How do you mean?"

"If Ana María Rosalita were here, she'd tell you. She may be young and small, but she is a great *hechicera*. As a worker of spells, I've never seen her equal."

Oh, golly, thought Ronnie. Here we go again. But quickly he said, "I've been thinking about her. We've got to go and get her. Tonight."

Black Luis nodded slowly. "I've been thinking of her too. She must leave there tonight. Tomorrow may be too late. But Marlowe and I will get her. You'd better stay here."

"Nothing doing! From what you've told me of that place, you and Marlowe can't manage it alone. I'm going."

"But you're so pale. Your face and your hair. If someone sees you—and they will—"

"I'll rub soot or something over me." Ronnie paused, scowled at the money, then asked, "Where's Marlowe? I—I've got to talk to him."

"He went outside to check on those fellows."

Ronnie began picking up the bills on the table. He was tucking them away in his billfold when Marlowe's sharp voice sounded in the darkness of the entrance.

"*¡Marinero!*" he called excitedly. "More men have come! Look down on the beach."

The black boy whirled to the recess and pressed his face to the crack in the rock. Ronnie slipped in beside him and did the same. Their narrow window on the world afforded a clear view, not only of the shelf below, but of the sea grape tree beyond the foot of the mountain, and the scrap of beach to the left of it.

Two men were setting up a tripod above the beach. Several others had paused near the sea grape and were studying what seemed to be a chart. It took only a glance for Ronnie to realize what was happening.

"They are surveyors and builders," he said.

"Surveyors!" Black Luis echoed. "Builders! But—but why? What—"

"You've got deep water here," Ronnie said slowly. "Don't you realize what that means?"

"But—but there's deep water all around the island."

"Not up as close as this, in a place that's protected. I'll bet some

company wants to build a factory here."

"A—a *factory?*"

"Yes. And not just an ordinary one, either, if they plan to bring their own ships in here. It'll have to be huge."

"No!" the black boy whispered. "No! I won't have it!"

"If you can prove you own the land," Ronnie reminded him, "it's your chance to get rich."

"But he's rich now!" Marlowe exclaimed. "Unless you're talking about money—and mere money couldn't buy what this place gives him."

"It sure couldn't," Black Luis muttered. "But how am I going to keep it? Even if Ana María Rosalita helps me, I—I can't fight them all."

Ronnie said, "Sure you can. Didn't you ever hear of fighting fire with fire?"

"What's fire got to do with it? I don't dig you, Blue Boy."

"We'll start with that money you saw on the table. It may be evil, but we'll need it to get the fire going. Bernardo's using the law to drive you off and get rid of you. So we'll use the law to drive him off."

"But—"

"Just a moment. I've got to know one thing. When you were in Santo Domingo, did Don Carlos ever change your citizenship?"

"Not that I know."

"Did you ever sign your name to any piece of paper having to do with citizenship?"

"Ha! I never signed my name to anything. Why should I? I was just another black boy named Luis. Don Carlos said I was the blackest Luis he'd ever known, and he'd known lots. He always called me Black Luis. It was a joke between us. You see, my real name is Black. Luis Black. It's on the records here. But in Santo Domingo I was just a black boy who hung around doing odd jobs, and who spoke the same language all the other boys spoke. Nobody ever asked me where I came from."

"Why were you doing odd jobs? I thought you went there to work for Don Carlos."

"And that's just what I did. I was his spy."

Ronnie stared at him. "His *spy?*"

"Sure. With Marlowe's help."

Marlowe said, "Somebody had to find out what wickedness was going on behind his back. That was our job. *¡Madre!* We found out."

"And just in time," Black Luis added. "I'd sure hate to be sent back. They know me now. They'd cut my throat. And if they got their dirty hands on Ana María Rosalita …" He shook his head.

"You won't be deported," Ronnie told him. "The law's on your side. I'm sure I can prove it."

"How?"

"I'll explain it tomorrow, after I've been to Mayagüez."

"Mayagüez! But you can't—"

"I've *got* to go, and as soon as possible. But not till we get Ana María Rosalita here. So we'd better start figuring how we're going to manage it. Have either you or Marlowe been inside Las Alturas?"

"I've been in it," the black boy said slowly. "But I don't know it too well. Marlowe, he's been all over it."

Ronnie, his lip clenched between his teeth, turned and searched the dark corner of the cave. "Marlowe," he begged, "please come out. We —we've got to get acquainted. It'll take all three of us to get Ana María Rosalita out of that place, but the biggest job is yours."

"I know it," Marlowe muttered. "I'm the only one who can get in Las Alturas without being seen."

"Then please come out and help us draw a plan of the place."

Marlowe did not answer. Black Luis said, "He's shy."

"And I don't blame him," said Ronnie. "Marlowe, I'd feel the same way if I were in your place. But honest, I think of you as one of us, and that's all that matters. Marlowe, please …"

Marlowe said sharply, "How can a ghost possibly show himself?"

"But you're not a ghost! I've already guessed what you are. So why keep hiding?"

"You—you've guessed?" said Marlowe in a small voice. But almost instantly he exclaimed, "Oh, fiddle-dee-pooh! You've outsmarted yourself, Blue Boy. You couldn't know. Or would you be stringing me?"

"I'm not stringing you. I've figured it out. You're about the rarest thing on earth. You're a—"

"*Don't say it!*" Marlowe screeched. "Think it if you wish. But don't ever, *ever* say it!"

"But why—"

"Because you'll destroy my integrity. That's why. I won't be *me* anymore. I'll just be something you've classified, like a bird or a bug. I simply won't have it. You must accept me as I am, and stop prying."

"But I have accepted you," Ronnie insisted.

"Yes, but you're still prying to see if you're right—and you *could* be wrong. I could be many things besides what you think, including a disembodied voice. How does that grab you, Mr. Smarty?"

Ronnie swallowed. "Okay. You win. I—I'll play it any way you want, Marlowe. But please help us."

"Of course I'll help! I know the inside of Las Alturas better than that rascally Bernardo will ever know it. Get a pencil and some paper and I'll tell you exactly how to draw the plan of it. But before we get started, let's have some breakfast. I can't think on an empty stomach,

and neither can you."

Black Luis grinned and said, "Breakfast on the way, *compañeros*."

Oranges and some generous pieces of freshly baked plantain and fish, served on banana leaves, speedily appeared on the table. A smaller piece of fish and half of a peeled orange were placed on another section of banana leaf and left in the angle of the kitchen.

All this, in the strangeness of the cave, was beginning to seem utterly mad and unworldly to Ronnie until he sat down at the table with paper and pencil. Then once again he found himself staring at his half-eaten mango.

Marlowe, he was sure, could be explained. But there was no explanation for the mango. Unless, of course, Dr. Prynne was right …

9
ASSAULT UPON A CITADEL

BY RONNIE'S WATCH it was twenty minutes of midnight when they set out for Las Alturas. They would have preferred a much later start, when fewer people were abroad, but it would have allowed too little time to accomplish their mission.

"After we get there," he said, "we ought to have at least two hours to find Ana María Rosalita and get her out of the place. A lot of little things could hold us up. And we can't afford to have daylight catch us before we get back here. Too many people are on the watch for us."

"I'll find her," Marlowe promised. "That won't take me five minutes."

Sure, thought Ronnie. If you're what I think you are, you'll recognize her scent and go straight to her room. But aloud he said, "It isn't finding her that worries me. It's getting her out. They're bound to have her door locked. Suppose the key is gone. What'll we do?"

"The key will be in the Señora's room," Marlowe said promptly. "I'll go there and get it."

"And if you can't locate it?"

"I'll find it if I have to cut loose with the spook deal. *¡Madre!* It would give me great pleasure to scare that one out of her skin. She is *diabólica*."

"Don't you pull any spook stuff till I know the score. Remember, I'm going inside with you."

Black Luis said, "Don't you think I ought to be the one to go inside? I'm bigger than you, and a lot stronger. She'll have things to carry—"

"No, it has to be me inside. Being small's a help. I can hide easier. And my memory will be a bigger help if something goes wrong. You don't realize how many things I can think of at the same time. Anyway, someone has to keep guard outside. It ought to be a person familiar with the country. Why, I don't even know what those little creatures are that sing so loud at night."

"That's the coqui," said Black Luis. "It's called the songbird of the islands."

"A bird, is it?"

"It's not really a bird. It's a tree frog. A tiny one. It's named from its call—co-kee! Most sing co-kee, but some sing ma-ree. At night you can

always tell when someone is coming, because the coquis stop singing when he is near. *¡De veras!* Maybe I had better be the one to keep guard. The coquis tell me many things."

Just before they left, Ronnie carefully smeared his face and arms with a concoction made of grease, a bit of soot, and a red powder from pounded achiote seeds, which grew wild on the mountainside. It turned his skin a deep mahogany. When he had drawn on his wig and a dark shirt, he doubted if even Peter Pushkin would have glanced at him twice.

Marlowe went ahead to make sure no one was around, and Ronnie crawled and fumbled his way along behind Black Luis in a slow descent of the mountain. After they had waded the creek the going was easy for some distance, but presently the beach became almost too rough to follow. Until they neared the captain's cottage nearly a mile down the coast, they were forced to weave in and out through brush, outcroppings of rock, and scattered clumps of wild guavas and sea grape.

It was a bright night, with a half-moon riding the ridges on the left, and Ronnie could see every detail around him. Several times he tried his best to catch a glimpse of Marlowe, but failed. His first guess was that Marlowe might be a mongoose. The evidence, at least, pointed in that direction. And though he hadn't remembered it at first, there really had been a talking mongoose that lived, of all places, on the Isle of Man. And a smart one too. He had read of it by accident when he was looking up something else, but had paid no attention to it because he hadn't believed it. It had sounded too kooky, like Ana María Rosalita's magic. Still …

As they approached the gleaming strip of beach that marked the captain's property, Black Luis turned sharply to the left. Within the shadow of the palms that formed a dense grove here, Ronnie paused a moment and looked back wistfully at the moonlit beach. The lazy sea that washed it glowed with phosphorus. What a beautiful spot! He wondered what it would be like to feel carefree, and be able to run along the water's edge in his bare feet, and to swim and fish, and hunt for shells. He had never had a chance to do those things. Nor would Gus have ever thought of bringing him to a spot like this.

"Keep moving," Black Luis whispered. "We've a long climb ahead. And be mighty careful. We're almost at the road."

They crept past the cottage, a pale masonry shape on concrete stilts, with every opening covered with grillwork. Beyond it the ground sloped upward through the breadfruit grove the captain had spoken of, and now the sound of traffic could be heard for the first time. Presently Ronnie saw the headlights of cars, and then they were crouching behind a gate, waiting for a chance to cross the road

unnoticed.

So far they had seen no one. But all at once the nearness of the road, with its seemingly endless traffic, brought sharply back to Ronnie the danger he and Black Luis were in. To his knowledge, at least four men were searching for him, and probably as many more were on the watch for Black Luis. It would be a miracle, he suddenly realized, if they could actually do what they had planned and not run into trouble.

At the first break in the traffic Marlowe called to them, and they raced across the road and slipped into the tangle on the other side.

From the darkness that now enclosed them Marlowe said cheerfully, "All is clear below, comrades. The path is here, and it is safe to use your light. But watch it later. Something is going on upstairs."

"Any idea what it is?" Ronnie asked quickly.

"Can't tell yet. But a lot of cars keep going up and down on the Las Alturas road."

They began climbing the narrow, steep path, which was a shortcut used by the plantation workers to the coffee trees high above. The private road to Las Alturas wound back and forth somewhere on the right; occasionally headlights flashed through the treetops as a car swept around a turn.

It was nearly a half hour before they reached a corner of the plantation and saw, clinging to the side of the mountain ahead, the huge century-old villa of the Montoya family. Ronnie, breathing raggedly and all but exhausted from his climb, stared at it in dismay.

The place was ablaze with lights. Above the happy singing of the coquis, as loud here as in the jungle below, came strains of music and occasional voices lifted in drunken song. Bernardo, obviously, was having what seemed to be turning into an all-night party.

"*¡Mil diablos!*" Black Luis muttered. "What are we going to do?"

"What we came to do," Ronnie said grimly. "I'm going to get her out of there. And if anybody tries to stop me—"

"You're not big enough to get tough without a weapon," Black Luis told him. He took out his knife and groped in the shrubbery. Presently he came up with two small clubs the size of a policeman's nightstick. "Thought I'd better have one myself," he admitted. "Let's go."

They crept forward on a branching path that led, Ronnie knew, to the servants' entrance in the lower wall. The careful plan he had drawn from the descriptions given him had fixed every detail of Las Alturas clearly in his mind. With its great supporting walls, the place was like a fort. The main entrance, high on the right, was through huge iron gates and across a broad courtyard, now jammed with cars. The only practical way to slip inside, he had reasoned, would be through the servants' door they were now approaching. With

Marlowe's help, of course, for it would have to be unlocked from the inside.

They stopped at a sudden warning whisper from Marlowe. Ronnie dropped to his hands and knees and crawled carefully forward until he could peer around the clumps of flowering shrubs that blocked his view.

Now, for the first time, he could see the servants' entrance. His mouth tightened. The outside light was on, the outer door of iron grillwork was ajar, and a man and a woman were standing on the threshold, drinking from paper cups while they peered out at the night. They must have come from the kitchen just above, for both wore aprons.

Black Luis crawled up beside him, grunted, but said nothing. All they could do was wait. Ronnie scanned the windows, hoping to discover one that could be entered. But like the captain's house and most of the others he had seen on the island, every opening was covered with ornate grillwork as a protection against prowlers.

Suddenly he whispered, "Marlowe?"

"Right here," came the whispered reply from under a bush. "You're about to ask me if I can sneak in unobserved."

"Can you?"

"Certainly! I'm a very clever little fellow. Shall I enter, find Ana María Rosalita's room, and tell her we'll be up soon to let her out?"

"Yes. And check on the key, will you? If it's in the Señora's room, maybe you'd better bring it to me. It could save us a lot of trouble later."

"*¡Madre!* If I should find the key, it just occurs to me that it might be stupid not to use it immediately. Why not let her out on the spot? That is, if I can handle such an unwieldy object. The keys in that den of iniquity are enormous."

"No, Marlowe! Don't do that! It'll be dangerous. Someone's bound to see her—"

"What difference will it make? Listen to them! They're whooping it up. Who would bother to stop her, or even care? No one but the Señora or Bernardo. And naturally I will take no chances with those two."

"Okay," Ronnie said doubtfully. "It might be worth a try."

Something told him it wouldn't work, but there was nothing else they could do at the moment.

He sat chewing worriedly at his lip, trying to think of other plans if this one should fail. All at once he whispered to Black Luis, "Do you know where the fuse box is located?"

"Fuse box? You mean where the electricity comes into the house?"

"Yes." Evidently Black Luis had had more experience with lamps

than electrical circuits. Ronnie raised his head and pointed to a wire slanting through the trees high on the right. “See yonder? That’s the power line coming up from the road. But with all the vines and growth around the house I can’t tell where the line enters.”

“I remember now,” said the black boy. “Go in that door yonder, climb the steps to the kitchen like you’ve drawn on the plan, and at the top of the steps, on the wall to the right, there’s a big flat metal box with wires coming out of it. That must be it.”

That had to be it, Ronnie thought, and realized Las Alturas had been built before the days of electricity and concealed wiring. “Is the fuse fox an old-fashioned one, with a knife switch in a separate box, or is it modern?”

“I—I wouldn’t know. What difference does it make?”

It would make a lot of difference. But all he said was, “Can’t tell yet. Wait till Marlowe gets back.”

Impatiently he watched the two servants, who were still standing in the doorway. Finally he glanced at the luminous hands of his watch. Why did time always seem to drag so when you were waiting for something to happen?

The two servants left, but their place at the door was almost immediately taken by another servant who glumly lounged there smoking a cigarette. The slow minutes crept by. What had happened to Marlowe?

Abruptly Black Luis plucked his sleeve and pointed to the sky on the right. The stars were being blotted out by spreading darkness. A faint rumbling could be heard in the distance.

“*¡Cáspita!*” he muttered uneasily. “We’ve got to get that small one out of there fast, or we’re in trouble. If that rain hits us, we won’t find our way off this mountain before daylight.”

At that moment the servant moved away from the door, and almost immediately afterward there was a rustling under the shrubbery and Marlowe returned. “I found her, *compañeros*,” he began hurriedly, and now his sharp little voice was no longer cheerful. “She is in that middle bedroom upstairs on the east side, next to the Señora’s room on the northeast corner. She is locked in, of course, the excuse being—from what I overheard—that she is subject to fits and quite violent. She—”

“What’s wrong?” Ronnie interrupted impatiently.

“There’s nothing wrong with *her*, except that she’s hungry. It’s that ding-ratted blasted *key*,” Marlowe wailed. “It’s not in the door. It’s not in the Señora’s room. I tore the place apart. I ripped it asunder. I made a shambles of it. When I found out they hadn’t fed our little *camarada* a mouthful of food since they brought her here, I went quite berserk. In my anxiety to find the key, I got into the Señora’s closet and quite

shredded her best dresses. But no key. *¡Madre de Dios!* What was I to do? I rushed back to Ana María Rosalita's room and talked to her under the door, and she said get a key from another room and try it. That I did, pronto. But no luck. All the keys are different, except that they are monstrous. Then Ana María Rosalita said that maybe the Señora kept the key in that gold mesh bag she always carries in her hand. It would be just like her, and it seemed the only chance. So downstairs I go in a flash to find the Señora, and there she is in the middle of the drawing room floor. And what is she doing?"

Marlowe paused, gasping, breathless. Then he almost shrieked, "She is dancing! Dancing alone! A solo. Just as if she were nearer fourteen than forty. All the others are sitting in a big circle around her, clapping their hands and singing. And the mesh bag? She is waving it aloft as if it were the head of John the Baptist." Marlowe paused again, and gasped, "Oh, that infamous female python of a *desollada!* How I would like to give her a taste of my teeth!"

Ronnie said quickly, "Could you tell by the way the bag was swinging if there was anything heavy inside?"

"It was heavy! I would swear the key is in it."

"Then use your teeth, and we'll get it. Right now, while she's still dancing. But we'll have to change plans entirely. Here's the idea."

Marlowe would dash in first and head for the drawing room while Ronnie and Black Luis rushed for the fuse box. The moment the box was opened and he knew what could be done with it, he would start counting slowly to give Black Luis time to race up the back stairs to Ana María Rosalita's door. At the count of ten he would pull the switch, plunging the house into darkness, then wreck the fuse box if he could, and run for the main stairway with his flashlight. His final task would be to use the light to lead Ana María Rosalita and Black Luis—who would carry her bags—safely out of the house.

He was still talking swiftly as he leaped to his feet and started for the still-open grill door ahead. His final word was, "Don't forget, we'll leave by the *front* entrance. The back hall will be jammed, because everybody will be trying to turn the lights on. If we get separated, just keep going and we'll meet at the captain's house."

He wanted to ask Black Luis if he knew how to drive a car, but there wasn't time. They were suddenly inside the servants' entrance, and leaping up the short flight of steps to the service hall behind the kitchen. One glance told him he was too small to reach the switch box, but before he could ask for help Black Luis had swung up a long arm and jerked the box open, and in the next instant had thrust forth a chair for him to stand on.

As Black Luis sped away behind him, Ronnie began to count. At the same time his eye explored the unfamiliar interior of the box. It was

fairly modern, which meant that, instead of a dangerous knife switch in a separate compartment, there were a series of square plugs that could be pulled out entirely. Unfortunately it had been poorly assembled, for three of the plugs had identical marking.

He was trying to decide which was the main plug, when his eye caught movement in the kitchen door. He turned to see a woman in an apron staring at him.

"You there!" she snapped. "What in the world do you think you are doing?"

Ronnie held up a finger for silence and gave her a smile. "I've been ordered to play a trick on the party," he informed her in a stage whisper. "Don't say anything."

He was already past the count. Holding both his stick and flashlight in one hand, he jerked out the first plug.

Nothing happened.

He thrust the plug into his pocket so it could not be used again, and jerked out the second one. Again nothing happened. Desperately he gave the third a jerk, and instantly Las Alturas was plunged into darkness.

He got down from the chair and hastily thrust all three plugs behind a pile of newspapers he had noticed in the corner. Only now did he turn on his light and dart past the servant woman who was still gaping in the doorway.

From the rooms beyond the kitchen he could hear startled voices, mutterings, and uncertain laughter. Abruptly there was an earsplitting scream, and a woman shrilled, "*Something's biting me! Help! Help!*"

Using his light as little as possible, Ronnie dodged around the near-panicky crowd in the drawing room, gained the entry hall, and raced up the great marble stairway. By the time he reached the door to Ana María Rosalita's room, Black Luis had torn open a mesh bag and with an unsteady hand was trying to thrust a huge key into the lock.

The key went in, the door opened, and the light shone on the white pinched face of the tiny girl inside. So much had happened since he had seen her last that it seemed to Ronnie weeks had passed instead of less than two days.

"Oh, I *knew* you'd come!" he heard her say. "I *knew* it. I'm all ready."

"Thank Marlowe," he told her quickly. "Grab her bags, Black Luis. Let's get out of here, *camarada!* Fast!"

He caught her hand and tugged her swiftly along the hall to the stairway. They hurried downward. In the rooms below matches and lighters were beginning to make pinpricks in the darkness. As they reached the entrance hall, the beam of a flashlight suddenly swept the area and fastened upon them. The beam touched Ana María Rosalita,

and there was a startled grunt followed by a curse.

"So it *was* a trick!" a man said hoarsely. "Get back upstairs, girl! As for you two, I'll have the law—"

Ronnie swung his light in the man's face, hoping to blind him momentarily so they could slip past, but a hand far stronger than his own knocked it from his grasp and seized him firmly. The flashlight smashed against a wall and went out. But Ronnie was still carrying his stick under one arm, and now he managed to get a grip on it with his left hand. He began swinging it in a fury.

That it was Bernardo he was attacking he had known from the instant he glimpsed the man's face. There was no mistaking the resemblance to the Señora. It added strength to his fury, and he must have knocked Bernardo down and broken his flashlight, for the way to the front entrance was suddenly clear. He managed to find Ana María Rosalita's hand again, and they ran outside together.

Black Luis was close behind, but Ronnie did not know this until they had dodged around a row of cars in the courtyard and were near the gate. The rushing blackness overhead had already swallowed the moon, and the stars were rapidly vanishing. He could barely make out the gate opening.

Then he heard Black Luis say, "What are we going to do? We'll never find our way down the mountain unless we follow the road. And in two minutes the sky will break open and we'll be wishing we had fins."

"Can you drive a car?"

"No."

Ronnie swallowed. He had handled a car only once in his life, and that was a little Italian sportster he had been allowed to use on an Argentine estate. There were cars here he could have stolen, for he doubted if many of the owners would have bothered to remove the keys in a place like this. But most of them seemed to be large machines with which he was unfamiliar. Dare he risk driving one on a narrow mountain road, on an inky night in a rainstorm?

Already scattered drops were beginning to fall. He looked wildly around, hoping to see a small sports model, but a sudden warning from Black Luis sent them scurrying to the side of the courtyard. They crouched behind a large sedan as racing headlights swept around the mountain. A car whined upward at high speed, and whirled recklessly through the gate. It came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the driveway, effectively blocking the only exit.

A man got out and stood swaying drunkenly while he bellowed for a servant to come and carry his packages. When no servant appeared, he lurched toward the villa, leaving the motor running and the headlights on to show him the way.

“We’ve got to take it,” Ronnie whispered. “Let’s go!”

He caught Ana María Rosalita’s hand, and they raced to the car and piled in. Black Luis followed with the bags and tumbled into the back seat amid a collection of bottles and boxes.

It was a sports car, and it had a set of floor shifts enough like those he had once used to give him a grain of confidence. But his legs were not long enough to reach the brake pedal, and he was forced to slide the seat forward before he could put the thing in reverse and attempt to turn around.

Somehow, perhaps with the aid of Ana María Rosalita’s whispered prayers, he got the car turned and headed through the gate.

As they started down the mountain, thunder clanged and roared around them, and the tropic rain began to fall in blinding sheets.

10
SPELL

RONNIE HAD THE PRESENCE OF MIND to shift to low gear, or they might have gone over the edge of the mountain on the first hairpin turn. The car, though a sportster, was much larger and heavier than the one he had been allowed to use so briefly, and he sat so low in the bucket seat that he was unable to make out the side of the road. The only thing to do, he realized, was to hug the mountainside on his left, and pray.

The rain increased. With every passing second it became more difficult to see the way. Several times he braked to a full stop, waited until he could glimpse a few more yards ahead, then cautiously inched onward.

They may have been halfway down to the main road when some instinct warned him it was time to stop. As he braked again his straining eyes were able to distinguish what seemed to be two ancient gateposts on the left.

"Do you know if it's safe to drive in there?" he asked Black Luis.

"It's a good road for a short distance. It goes down to a pineapple field in the other valley."

Ronnie tugged the wheel over. Carefully, slowly, he sent the car between the posts and on into the blackness on the other side. When he finally stopped, it was only because it had become impossible to see anything ahead.

He turned off the switches and closed his eyes, suddenly limp. Behind him Black Luis whispered fervently, "*¡Madre de Dios!* We made it!"

"Yes," he managed to say. "We'll be safe here for a while. But as soon as we can see, we'd better start walking."

Beside him Ana María Rosalita gave a tremulous, "Oh!" Then, "Oh! It's so *won*derful!"

"It sure is," said Black Luis. "It's wonderful."

"What's so wonderful?" said Ronnie.

"Being with people who care about you," she said. "I mean people who really care. It's so awful to be alone and not have *any*body."

"I know what you mean," Ronnie admitted. "I've been all through that."

"Then why don't you be my brother?" she said. "Black Luis is. I made him my brother after Bernardo turned out to be such a monster. Anyway, I think it would be nice to have two brothers. Then we'd be a sort of family."

Ronnie swallowed. "Why," he began, "that—that's a great idea. We're all in the same boat. I mean, we don't have relatives or anybody else that gives a hoot. We have only each other."

They were silent a moment, and the only sound was the thundering rain. Then in a tiny voice Ana María Rosalita said, "I—I'm so happy I could cry."

"Then why don't you?" Ronnie said. "From what I've read, it's the best thing in the world for people at times."

"But *hechiceras* don't cry. Only I—I'm so weak." She tried to suppress a sniffle and added, "And when I'm weak I'm like a run-down battery, and I just can't help myself."

"Oh, golly," Ronnie burst out, "you must be starved! Marlowe said those devils didn't give you a bite to eat! What made them treat you that way? Are they just plain mean?"

"Money-loving mean," Black Luis muttered. "Can't you see? They've got to get rid of her. If they don't, that *bribón* of a Bernardo won't inherit what her papa left her. But they're afraid of her. Especially the Señora. So they starve her."

"You mean—"

"It's just like our little sister says. Starve an *hechicera*, and she gets so weak her battery runs down. She can't protect herself."

"I—I see."

"And she can't protect herself when she's trying to help somebody else, either. That's why the Señora was able to wallop her on the dock, like you told me about. But she kept that man from shooting you."

"Yes," Ronnie admitted. He was careful to keep doubt from his voice, even though he wondered. "She sure did."

Ana María Rosalita giggled suddenly. "It's not really funny; it just seems that way when I look back on it. Maybe it's because I'm so hungry I'm silly. But you should have seen that weaselly creature's face when I cried to him, 'You can't shoot!'—and of course he couldn't, because I'd turned on all I had. And then the Señora gave me the wallop. O-o-oh! I've never been hit so hard. Bernardo's chauffeur had to carry me to the car, and I was still dizzy when they locked me in that room."

Ronnie found himself clenching his fists in renewed fury. "Anyway," he said, "Marlowe partially paid her back for hitting you. He bit her. But good. I hope her foot rots off."

"Marlowe bit her? I thought I heard a scream, but—"

"That was Marlowe sinking his teeth in. When he let her have it, she

dropped the bag that had the key to your room in it. So you can thank him—" He stopped suddenly, then exclaimed, "Hey! Where *is* Marlowe, anyway?"

Black Luis said," He doesn't like to ride in cars. But don't worry about him. He'll be curled up somewhere waiting for the rain to stop."

"I keep wondering what he is," Ronnie said curiously. "I'm pretty sure I know, because only a—"

"Don't say it!" Black Luis interrupted quickly. "Remember what he told you."

"And we're not allowed to tell you," Ana María Rosalita added. "Because we promised we'd never, *never* give his secret away, and if we didn't keep our promise to him he'd know it, and it would spoil everything. But he'll tell you himself later, specially when he learns you've become our brother. Anyway, what difference does it make what he is? He's a personality, and practically a brother, and that's all that matters."

She paused, sniffed, and said abruptly, "I smell shrimp!"

"Maybe they're falling in the rain," Ronnie offered.

"Oh, *Madre mía*, I mean *cooked* shrimp. I wish I didn't love them so. I've been dreaming of them for hours and hours. I could eat tons of them. I tell you I smell them."

"You're so hungry it's making your nose play tricks."

"But I do smell shrimp!"

"I smell them too!" Black Luis burst out. "They must be back here. Under all these bags and bottles. If we had a light …"

Ronnie fumbled hastily over the instrument panel. Suddenly the light above his head came on. Ana María Rosalita, seeing his dyed skin for the first time, squealed and cried, "*¡Cáspita!* You've turned into an Indian!" At the same moment he saw the left side of her face, which had been hidden from him when her door was opened. It was swollen and discolored, and her eye was nearly closed.

Black Luis saw it and gasped, and muttered an angry exclamation. Ronnie growled, "For what she did to you, I hope both that devil's feet rot off!"

"No," said the tiny girl. "Don't say that. I think she is *loca* and cannot help what she does. Where is that shrimp? Oh, find it, Black Luis, before I perish utterly!"

Behind them bottles clinked and clattered and there was a great upheaval of things. All at once Black Luis cried, "*¡Mira!*" He emerged holding up a large container made for carrying hot and cold foods. Inside was a heavy plastic bag filled with freshly boiled shrimp, all peeled and buttered. There were enough in the bag to feed thirty people. "And there are ten big boxes of potato chips to go with it," Black Luis said happily. "*Gracios a Dios*. Let us eat."

"And go easy, *camarada*," Ronnie cautioned. "I went hungry for a couple days once, then stuffed myself. Was I ever sorry!"

Ana María Rosalita made only gurgling noises of pure happiness. But after ten minutes she was able to say, "I've never, *never* tasted anything so good, and I just couldn't stop till I'd built up my willpower. It took fifty-two shrimp to do it. But now I have the will to resist further food until we get to the cave."

At the thought of the cave, Ronnie scowled at his watch, suddenly troubled. Finally he began searching the car for a flashlight. There was no flashlight in the car, though he located some paper cups, which they held out in the rain to fill with drinking water.

At last he said to Black Luis, "Is there a path along here somewhere that will take us down to the highway?"

"There's a path, but it's a bad one. Even if we had a light, I wouldn't want to try it in the dark. We'd be better off on the Las Alturas road."

"That's too dangerous. It's not raining as hard as it was. I'll bet Bernardo's got cars out looking for us already. The path's the only way."

"Well, we sure can't take it till there's enough light to see by."

Ronnie shook his head. "I'm afraid that'll be too late … unless we want to hide somewhere in the woods all day. But I don't like that. Golly, there are too many people on the watch for us already. There are four that I know of trying to find me—and there must be at least four more searching for you. And in a few hours, when Bernardo gets things organized, oh, brother!"

"But—but I don't understand," Ana María Rosalita interrupted. "Why are they after you, Black Luis? I know you've had to hide so Bernardo wouldn't make trouble. But has it got any worse since your last letter?"

Ronnie exclaimed, "You bet it's got worse! The police and the immigration people are after him. Bernardo wants him caught and deported, and I mean fast. Bernardo's pulling every trick in the book to get that land, so a factory can be built on it. I think a big company wants it. Anyway, the surveyors were out there this morning—I mean yesterday morning—"

"Not a factory!" the tiny girl cried.

"I think so, and it'll probably be a whale of a big one. The place is on deep water, and that makes it really special. Why, if Bernardo handles things right, that land would earn a thousand times what the government would ever pay for it in land reform. I'll bet—"

"Wait!" she said. "I—I've just remembered something. When the Señora brought me to Las Alturas, Bernardo followed us upstairs and they talked about a factory. A big, big, *big* factory where they would make chemicals and plastics, and all kinds of stinky things. It would

be next to a little mountain that they would grind up for the lime or something in it. And all the land around was to be flattened, and they would build hundreds and hundreds of little boxy houses that they'd rent or sell to the workers for a profit. He could talk of nothing but profit. Profit, profit, profit!"

She caught her breath and added in a whisper, "I—I didn't even dream he was talking about your place, Black Luis."

They were silent a moment. At last Black Luis repeated sadly, "Profit, profit, profit! My papa said that a man who lives for profit would cut down every tree in the Garden of Eden to make a dollar."

"Sure," Ronnie muttered. "Where d'you think all the Edens have gone? Into somebody's pocket. In this world the dollar comes first."

There was another silence. Beside him Ronnie saw that Ana María Rosalita was clenching her hands, and that a terrible anger had risen in her. Suddenly she began beating her tiny fists upon the seat. "Black Luis is my brother," she whispered. "I'll not allow my brother to be treated so horribly. No! I'll not have it!" She was trembling now, and her voice was rising. "Oh!" she cried. "Oh! That dog! That wretch! That unspeakable thief! I'll make him wish he'd never been born!"

She stopped, and an icy calm came over her. "I must find a telephone," she announced quietly.

"A—a telephone?" Ronnie gasped. "What in the world for?"

"To make a call, of course."

"But—"

"Do not ask me about it. No one must even speak of it until I have made my call and done what I am going to do. It must be done. And as soon as possible. But first I must find a telephone."

Ronnie said, "I know where to find the key to Captain Anders' cottage. Would he have a phone?"

"Not unless he had one put in after Papa sold him the place."

Black Luis said, "We'd better try it anyway. He just might have had one put in. If not, the nearest telephone is at the Beach of the Three Brothers. *¡Madre!* I would hate to go there today with all the world looking for us."

Ronnie frowned at his watch, then peered out at the dripping blackness. The rain seemed to have stopped. For the first time since the storm he could hear the coquis. They were shrieking happily.

"I don't know how we're going to travel in the dark," he said. "But if we don't want to get caught, we'd sure better get started."

Black Luis led the way, carrying Ana María Rosalita's bags. Ronnie followed, clinging to her with one hand; the other held fast to the plastic bag in which the shrimp had been packed. He had left most of the shrimp behind and kept only a small amount, which he thought

they might be in need of later.

The moment they left the car he had a vivid recollection of his last dream, and he was shaken by doubt. It seemed impossible that all three of them could ever grope their way safely to the highway.

By some miracle Black Luis found the path, but now their downward progress became ten times as uncertain and difficult. The next half hour was a nightmare. They tripped over rocks and roots, and slid and fell endlessly. A slow fright grew in Ronnie. There came a terrible moment when he lost contact with Ana María Rosalita, and stepped forward into nothingness. Now the dream became reality as he plunged downward.

He thought he had fallen into a cavern when another miracle occurred. Spongy growth cushioned his fall, and he landed in what seemed to be a thicket of young tree ferns. He called out to the others, and presently Ana María Rosalita came sliding down beside him. When they followed Black Luis again, the night was graying. Soon they could hear traffic on the highway, though it was bright daylight before they reached it.

They crouched for long minutes in the shrubbery, waiting for a break in the traffic, then they dashed madly for the safety of more shrubbery on the other side. They had come out far below the captain's place. Now, aware that many eyes could be on the watch for them here, they began creeping toward the breadfruit grove with all the caution they possessed.

At the very edge of the grove Ronnie was startled by a small, sharp voice coming from a guava thicket near him. Then he realized the speaker was Marlowe.

"Hold it, *compañeros!* Praise be that you got here safely! But go no farther. There are men everywhere looking for you. Even the police were here a few minutes ago, checking on the house."

"The police!" Ronnie whistled softly. "Marlowe, do you know if the captain has a phone?"

"Of course he has a phone! How else could he order a taxi when he needs one? He doesn't keep a car here."

"Well, we've got to get in and call some people. Do you think we can make it through the door without being seen?"

"Sit tight a minute and I'll take a look around. If the coast is clear, as they say, I'll bring you the key."

"It's in a coconut shell in the corner of—"

"I know where the key is hidden, brother Blue. Nothing around here escapes a smart little fellow like me." There was a quick, sniffing sound, and abruptly Marlowe exclaimed, "*¡Madre!* I smell shrimp! I'm expiring for a shrimp!"

"Oh, Marlowe," whispered Ana María Rosalita, "I know how you

feel." She reached quickly into the shrimp bag, then thrust her hand into the guava bush. "It's so good to be back with you, Marlowe. And thank you for biting the Señora!"

From the bush came small gurgling sounds of joy. "Um, nipping the Señora, um, was an unqualified pleasure. Ummm! There's nothing better than shrimp! Umm-m-m …"

"Except mangoes."

"I'll, um, bring you one shortly. Now that you are with us again, um, I'm sure all our fortunes will change. Sit tight, everyone. I'll be right back."

Hardly more than a minute could have passed when Ronnie heard a rustling in the guava bush, and a small brass key fell almost directly into his hand.

"All clear at the moment!" Marlowe said in a rush. "Make it fast, and you'll be safe. Don't forget to lock the door when you get inside, and keep away from the windows."

They raced through the breadfruit grove, passed the great mango tree that shaded the cottage, and ran up the high flight of steps to the veranda. In seconds they were through the outer grill door and the inner door to the hall, which opened to the same key.

Inside, safe at last, both Ronnie and Black Luis collapsed in the nearest wicker chairs. But Ana María Rosalita, seemingly undaunted by all she had been through, went directly to the telephone. Ronnie could only stare at her in astonishment.

The tiny girl was mud-streaked, torn, and bedraggled; her dark hair was awry, one eye was half closed, and the side of her face was swollen and bruised. But all this did not in the least detract from her look of absolute determination when she picked up the receiver. She managed to get the operator, and in a manner as grand as a duchess she demanded that a call be put through immediately to Las Alturas.

"This is Ana María Rosalita Montoya de la Torre," she announced, "and I must speak to Bernardo Montoya on a matter of greatest importance."

Ronnie had never seen her like. Whether it was her manner or the Montoya name that brought instant action, he could only guess, but all at once he was aware of a furious squawking coming from the receiver, and he realized that an angry Bernardo was on the other end of the line.

"Shut up and listen to me!" Ana María Rosalita ordered. In her high, clear voice there was all the coldness and sharpness of needle-pointed icicles. "Bernardo, you must instantly stop what you are doing to poor Black Luis, or you will be terribly, terribly, sorry. Have you forgotten that my grandmother was a daughter of the Shee? I have the power. I warn you I will use it unless you do what is right. Will you leave Black

Luis alone?"

From the receiver came more furious squawking. Abruptly Ana María Rosalita cried, "I have warned you, Bernardo! Now you must suffer. In an hour a wart will begin to grow on your nose. In two hours there will be another wart. By morning your face will be covered with them. There will be more, and more, and more, and they will grow uglier, and uglier, and uglier. You will become the most loathsome creature in all the islands. The only way you can ever get rid of them is to do what I have told you."

Quietly she replaced the receiver and came to the center of the room. With a little wave of her hand, she said in her duchess manner, "I must be left entirely alone."

Ronnie hastily followed Black Luis into the adjoining room, which turned out to be the captain's den. As he passed through the doorway he glanced quickly back, and glimpsed Ana María Rosalita sitting cross-legged on the floor, eyes closed, lips moving silently.

Black Luis whispered, "*¡Madre!* I'd sure hate to be Bernardo now!"

"You—you really believe—"

"Don't you, brother Blue?"

"I—I don't know what to believe," Ronnie confessed. "Don't forget, I wasn't raised the way you were."

"No," the black boy whispered. "And what a great pity. You didn't have my advantages. I had a wise papa, and he raised me right. He said to keep faith in God and Jesus, but don't take too much stock in the local priest."

"What was wrong with the local priest?"

"Oh, he didn't think magic was good. He taught that it all came from the devil. Imagine that! Why, the Bible is full of magic."

Ronnie said nothing. After all, he thought, he really shouldn't *dis*believe in something just because common sense said it was impossible. Common sense had once said that man couldn't split the atom or fly to the moon. And common sense was still trying to tell him that Dr. Prynne had rocks in his head. Yet, if there wasn't a second world like this one, existing in the same space but in another dimension, where did Marlowe go to get those impossible mangoes?

Time passed, and weariness pressed down upon him. He closed his eyes and started to drift off to sleep. But plans had been at work in the back of his head, and at the thought of the telephone he became wide awake on the instant. The telephone! Yesterday, when he had decided to go to Mayagüez, he hadn't dreamed that there might be an available telephone anywhere near. It would solve a lot of problems.

He tiptoed to the edge of the hall, found the telephone book, then slipped back into the den and began studying the list of Mayagüez lawyers. The important thing, of course, was to pick the right one.

He was carefully planning how to do this when a small sound jerked his head around. Ana María Rosalita, herself again, and now a very tired and bedraggled little girl, was coming into the room.

Black Luis whispered, “You—you’ve done it, small sister?”

“I’ve done it,” she told them, as she came in and practically fell upon the sofa. “It was an awful thing to do, and it quite used me up, but it had to be done. If you could see how bad your trouble sign has become …”

Suddenly she sat up, and a look of fright came over her small pinched face. “Oh, dear! All our trouble signs are looking absolutely ghastly. I just saw mine in the mirror, Boy Blue. It’s a horror, and yours is even worse. I—I hope nothing happens until I’ve had some rest. I’m too utterly gone to even—”

She was interrupted by Marlowe’s sharp little voice. From somewhere in the dense foliage near the side window he called, “I’ve brought something that ought to recharge you! Unlatch the screen, somebody, and I’ll toss it in.”

Black Luis swung out of his chair and started for the window. He froze in mid-stride as the telephone in the hall began to ring.

The sound brought Ronnie to his feet. He stood rigid with shock. Who could possibly be calling here? Had Bernardo guessed where they were? Or were the police on the line, hoping curiosity would betray a hidden occupant?

Again the telephone rang, imperiously demanding attention.

“Answer it!” Marlowe shrieked. “It must be important!”

Ronnie darted into the hall. With an unsteady hand he reached for the receiver.

11
THE MAGIC LINE

RONNIE SWALLOWED, and raised the receiver to his ear. "*¿Hola?*" he managed to say, pretending to be a house servant. He asked in Spanish, "To whom do you wish to speak?"

"Ron?" spoke a familiar voice. "Ron McHenry?"

In his overwhelming relief, Ronnie almost dropped the receiver. "Captain Anders!" he cried. "Oh, golly, I'm glad it's you! I didn't know whether to answer or not. So I just took a chance—"

"I took a chance myself, son. Tried a dozen times to reach you. Thought I'd give the cottage one more ring before I left. Heard you had a squeak getting ashore, but couldn't get the straight of it from anyone. Anyway, I've been doggoned worried about you. I'm in the Mayagüez office now, and if I had an hour to spare, I'd take a run out there. But my vessel's nearly loaded and I'll have to be under way shortly. Are you all right? Did you find Black Luis? Have you had any more trouble?"

"We—we've all had trouble, sir. We—"

"*All* of you? Who the dickens is with you?"

"Black Luis and Ana María Rosalita. We spent the night getting her away from Las Alturas. They had her locked up there. Those devils hadn't given her a bite to eat since she left the ship. She—"

"What?"

"We ducked in here to hide about an hour ago. Everybody's looking for us—the police, the immigration people, Bernardo's men...." He gave the captain a brief account of what was happening.

From the other end of the line came an explosion of salty wrath that rattled the receiver. Then the captain said tersely, "Ron, you're going to need help in this. I can be out there in fifteen minutes."

"Don't come out, sir. It isn't necessary. I'm sure I can handle things —"

"But, son, you're all in a spot! It's a dangerous situation. There must be something I can do."

"There certainly is, sir." Ronnie's mind was already leaping far ahead. "In fact, there are two things. But first, I wonder if this phone is safe?"

"Safe enough. Just keep speaking in English. Very few people at this

end of the island understand it."

"Well, the immediate thing is a lawyer. I want the best there is, and the cost doesn't matter."

The captain said without hesitation, "Pardo Green is your man. His office is in Mayagüez, and I've known him since he was your age. My only worry is that he may be busy. Maybe I'd better call him, tell him this is an emergency, and see if he'll meet you at the cottage."

That was exactly what Ronnie wanted. "But just one thing before you do. The three of us are minors, and we have no rights without a legal guardian to act for us. Ana María Rosalita has a guardian, but we've got to get rid of him, fast. Neither Black Luis nor I have anyone. So we've all decided we'll stick together and be a family. But of course we'll have to have a guardian. Will—will you let us name you for the job?"

"Guardian? For all three of you?" The captain sounded astounded.

"It—it's just a legal thing," Ronnie hastened to say. "I mean, we certainly wouldn't let it be of any expense to you—and as for interfering with your privacy here when you retire—"

"Doggone it, son, don't get me wrong. Of course I'll take on the job! I'm honored. It'll be up to the court to appoint me—and I can see a whale of a court battle shaping up before this thing's over—but I'm sure Pardo Green can handle it. Let me call his office, then I'll call you right back."

Ronnie hung up and turned to see Ana María Rosalita and Black Luis watching him breathlessly. "Did—did he say he would?" the tiny girl asked.

"He sure did. I hope you two don't mind my jumping in and picking him without talking it over with you first. But I had to grab him when the chance came. You see, if we want to stick together, we've got to have a guardian. So it ought to be someone we all know and like. We wouldn't want the court to appoint a stranger."

"*De veras*, no!" said Black Luis. "But the captain—ah, there is a man. They come no better."

"He's wonderful," whispered Ana María Rosalita. "Please, everybody keep his fingers crossed, and pray we get him." She crossed her fingers on both hands, drifted back to the sofa, and curled up upon it like an exhausted kitten. She was almost instantly sound asleep.

When Captain Anders called again a few minutes later she did not awaken. "I got Pardo Green's office," he told Ronnie. "Juan Pardo himself wasn't there, but I talked to both his partner and his secretary, and explained as much as I dared. They're hooked. I'm sure Juan Pardo will go along with them. He's in Aguadilla for the morning. They are trying to phone him in Aguadilla now and have him stop by the cottage on the way back to Mayagüez. His partner, Jaime García,

said he'd come out and see you himself this evening if they can't locate Juan Pardo in time. So we'll just have to wait."

"I see," said Ronnie. "It sounds very hopeful."

"And I've decided," the captain hastened on, "that if I can locate a substitute master in the next hour or two—and I'm sure I can—I'll stay over and see this thing through with you. Since I'll be retiring in a couple weeks anyway—"

"No, please—you mustn't do that! Can't you see what will happen? If Bernardo's lawyer is any good, he'll wreck you in court!"

"Wreck me? How?"

"If you appear too soon, he'll say you're behind all the trouble. You'll be accused of abduction, and contributing to our delinquency, and the court will be told that you are just trying to get your hands on us because of our money. We'll lose you—and we simply can't let that happen."

"Whew! I hadn't thought of that side of it. Doggone it, son, you sound like a lawyer."

"I—I've been forced to study it a little," Ronnie admitted. "Just for my protection." He drew a long breath of relief. Though he hadn't wanted to mention it, the captain's presence at a time like this, with so many people on the watch for them, could be a great danger.

"But, Ron," the captain added, "don't forget the spot you're in. You can't appear in public and help others without exposing yourself."

"I know that, sir, and I think I have a solution. I'm going to work on it as soon as I've talked with Pardo Green. What does he look like? Things are getting sort of rough, and I want to be able to recognize him before I let him in the door."

The captain described both lawyers, then discussed how they could keep in touch with each other during the coming weeks. Ronnie had a lump in his throat when he finally hung up. The possibility that he might actually have Captain Anders as a sort of substitute father was a little overwhelming.

As he turned away from the telephone he saw Black Luis hauling a pair of beach mattresses from the hall closet. "Let's get some sleep," the black boy mumbled.

They spread the mattresses upon the living room floor. Ronnie sank down on one and wearily removed his shoes. He tore off his wig, which miraculously had remained in place during their blind plunge down the mountainside, then sat a moment peering about the room. He was very uneasy.

"We ought to take turns standing guard," he said.

"Forget it, brother Blue. Marlowe's keeping watch. He can sniff trouble long before it gets here."

Ronnie was asleep the moment his head touched the mattress.

He awakened in the middle of his third dream of terrible reality to find Black Luis anxiously shaking him.

"Someone's coming!" the black boy whispered. "Two men, Marlowe said. Strangers. They left their car out by the gate."

Ronnie sat up, but for a moment it was impossible for him to think. The dream was too real, too vividly before him. After his first two experiences, he knew it was going to happen exactly as he saw it. Seldom had he felt so frightened and helpless.

With an effort he thrust the dream to the back of his mind, and glanced at his watch. It was hardly one o'clock. For a hopeful moment he wondered if the visitors could be Pardo Green and a friend. Then he realized that the lawyer would surely come alone.

He was studying the room carefully when he saw Ana María Rosalita watching him wide-eyed from the doorway of the den.

"Come in here, *camarada"* he whispered. "Keep down on the floor."

The living room, with bedrooms and den on either side, a broad veranda facing the sea, and kitchen and smaller veranda at the other end, was entirely windowless. Even if the place hadn't been built high off the ground, as a protection against floods and prowlers—apparently a common practice around the island—they ought to be safe here from prying eyes. But, somehow, in spite of the heavy grillwork that enclosed every opening, even the downstairs patio, he didn't feel safe.

He put a finger to his lips and crawled to the kitchen, where a corner window looked beyond the side of the grilled entry area. Hardly had he raised up to peer out cautiously between the curtains, when he glimpsed the men approaching through the breadfruit trees.

They were moving slowly, warily. Something about them seemed familiar, but the crowding foliage hid their faces until they were only a few yards from the steps. Then he stiffened with shock.

He was not surprised to recognize the shorter man as Josip, the cabin steward. Seeing Josip first, he instantly expected the other to be Peter Pushkin. But it wasn't Peter. The thin, quiet, gray man was Gus Woolman's old partner, Wally Gramm.

Wally Gramm! Seeing the man at this moment was a double shock, for Wally had been in his dream. Now he knew that it must have been Wally who drove Josip from the docks the other day, instead of Peter. But which of them had sent the gunmen—and where was Peter now?

As he stared at the man, something in his mind did an almost computerlike reassessment of what had happened in New Orleans. And, like a computer, it furnished him with an instant answer. It put Wally and Peter in entirely different roles, and though he couldn't prove it yet, he was sure the answer was right.

Wally moved to the steps, halted, and peered carefully around. Then

silently he climbed the steps and tested the grill door to the porch. On the ground below him Josip stood quiet and watchful.

Suddenly Wally Gramm called softly, “Ronnie? Ronnie boy? Let me in! Hurry, I’ve come to help you.”

Ronnie clutched his hands to keep them from trembling, and glanced back toward the living room. In the dimness beyond the hall he could just make out the pale little triangle that was Ana María Rosalita’s face. Again he put his finger to his lips, saw her nod, and almost jumped out of his skin as Wally Gramm pressed a button by the door, and the kitchen buzzer went off loudly.

“Ronnie!” the thin man called. “I know you’re here. This is Wally. I’ve come to help you, boy! Let me in!” He waited, pounded on the grill door, and pressed the buzzer several more times. “Ronnie, for heaven’s sake, use your head, boy! I’ve come all this way to help you. Let me in!”

Wally Gramm stood there more than a minute, listening, then silently went down the steps. On the ground, Josip said in a low voice, “He *has* to be here, sir. This is the captain’s place, and there was no question but that he was headed for here.”

“Let’s look around,” the thin man said. “If I could get inside …”

Ronnie waited, breathless, while the men circled the cottage. As nearly as he could guess, there was only one area below where they might possibly force an entry. This was in the front where, he reasoned, part of the grillwork must be hinged. Obviously there had to be a way of folding it aside so the place could be used as a patio, and so bathers could reach the beach without going through the kitchen and around outside. That meant an inside stairway.

He chewed on his lip a moment, trying to visualize where the stairway entrance could be hidden. At last he realized it must be in the rear wall of the living room, behind one of the doors he had thought opened to a closet.

Suddenly worried, he started to crawl over to investigate it. There he heard low voices coming from the far corner of the kitchen veranda. Peering out again, he glimpsed Josip and Wally Gramm moving away in the direction of the road. He watched until they were out of sight, then hurried back to the living room.

“They’re gone,” he muttered, sinking into the nearest chair. He was limp with relief. “One was that snoop of a Josip,” he told Ana María Rosalita. He explained about the steward to Black Luis and added, “He found out about this place, and brought a man here named Wally Gramm. I—I’ve got a feeling they’ve gone to find tools so they can try to break in. They believe I’m hiding here.”

The black boy held up a huge knobby walking stick he had found somewhere in the house. “Let them break in,” he said grimly. “May

the good Mother forgive me, but it will be the last time they break in anywhere."

"Pardo Green ought to be able to do something about them," Ronnie said. Seeing their puzzled faces, he remembered that they had all fallen asleep before he could tell them about the lawyer.

He explained and added, "All we can do now is wait."

"Oh, dear!" Ana María Rosalita exclaimed, rising. "Oh, dear! I must be a fright. I've got to get cleaned up before—"

"No you don't!" Ronnie ordered quickly. "You stay just as you are."

"But why?" she wailed. "I look ghastly! But utterly!"

"I don't care. I want the lawyer to see you, so he can tell the judge. When you fight law with law, you've got to use both barrels and all the ammunition you can find."

"Then maybe you ought to brighten up my bruises with some of your paint." Suddenly she giggled. "That is, if you can spare what's left. You ought to *see* yourself!"

"Oh, golly gee!" He gaped in the wall mirror. Dashing to the bathroom, he scrubbed at the blotched face, hardly recognizable as his own, but some of the paint refused to come off. Finally he compromised by rubbing his skin with a towel until it was an even tone, a somewhat dubious tan, and replaced his wig. He hated to wear the wig again, but it seemed wiser to keep the blue hair hidden.

A small, sharp voice called plaintively from one of the windows in the den, "Will somebody *please* bring me another shrimp before I expire? Don't you know it's time to eat?"

They decided to have lunch in the den so they could talk to Marlowe while he kept watch from the tree. The moment they entered, Ronnie found himself staring at two monstrous golden-red mangoes on the coffee table. Ana María Rosalita squealed with delight, and Black Luis speedily began slicing one of them into a bowl for dessert.

Ronnie forgot about food and stood frowning almost in disbelief at the remaining mango. Suddenly he went to the captain's desk and began jotting down the unforgettable numbers and symbols of Dr. Prynne's last—and doubtful—equation. He had not been able to put the dream out of his mind, but being occupied with Prynne's theory helped to keep it in the background.

Ana María Rosalita watched him as long as she could stand it. "Boy Blue," she burst out abruptly, "what in the world are you doing?"

"I'm trying to figure out the truth," he muttered.

"About what?" Marlowe called from the window.

"Those mangoes you bring, for one thing."

"They are magic mangoes," said Ana María Rosalita, with a touch of her duchess manner. "And naturally they come from a magic place."

"They're not magic," he persisted. "They're real. I've eaten one, and I know."

"That doesn't keep them from being magic, silly! Anyway, how can you possibly figure out magic things with mathematics?"

"Because you can always prove a truth of this kind with the right equations. Only, Prynne's theory is a hard thing to prove. And I—I never was too sure about it."

"H'mm," Marlowe grunted. "On something like this you'd better be sure. Don't you know that doubt is a closed door?"

"But—but blind belief is stupidity!"

"Oh, fiddle-dee-pooh! You can't see through a closed door. Now, let's hear about this Prynne's theory," Marlowe went on. "If it bugs you, maybe I can straighten you out. I'm a very logical little fellow."

"Dr. Prynne," said Ronnie slowly, "was a great mathematician whom few people could understand. He wrote a book called *Time and Duality, or the Mathematics of Coexistent Planes*. In it he set out to prove that every planet has a twin very much like it, and that the twin planet exists in the same space with it, but in another dimension."

"Well?" said Marlowe. "What about it?"

"What about it!" Ronnie cried. "Why—why, if you look at it logically, the whole idea is absolutely crazy—"

"But that's not a logical approach," Marlowe interrupted. "Didn't I tell you that doubt is a closed door?"

"Yes, but I'm trying to prove by mathematics—"

"Are you trying to prove he's right, or wrong?"

"I—I—"

"Oh, my goodness," said Ana María Rosalita. "All this is so silly. Can't you see that Dr. Prynne is right? Why, even my grandmother knew there was a magic world, and she didn't need a lot of stupid arithmetic to prove it. It's something every daughter of the Shee knows, practically from the time she's born. That's why it's so easy for anyone with the power to disappear." She snapped her fingers. "Just like that."

Ronnie gaped at her. He had tried to approach the mango mystery in an intelligent and scientific manner. But here it was bogged down again in a morass of magic.

Suddenly he demanded, "Did you ever disappear?"

"I haven't got around to it yet. But I'll try it soon."

"Ha!" said Marlowe teasingly. "Why haven't you tried it? It's not as easy as you think. And of course, if you happen to be chicken—"

"I'm not chicken!" the tiny girl retorted. "You know very well that no one, not even you, smarty pants, can slip under the magic line unless you're close enough to see it. After all, it isn't found everywhere. And I've been nowhere near it for ages."

"But—but what is this magic line?" Ronnie persisted.

Black Luis said, "I'm told it's just a sort of shimmering. Now you see it, now you don't—and it moves."

"A—a sort of shimmering?" Ronnie repeated, dazed. "But where?"

"It's along the beach in places, real low. You'd never see it unless you have the eyes for it. Our little sister, she has the eyes. I have not, so I must follow Marlowe. When he says jump, I jump. *Hombre*, but fast. Only I scramble—for one must go under, not over." Black Luis shook his head. "It would be a good world, a very good world, except for one thing. It is a magic place, surely, but it is lonesome. It is the most lonesome place I ever saw."

Ronnie stared from one to the other. Something very fixed and orderly within his mind seemed to have been given a rude shaking.

"Magic," he muttered. "I—I just can't—"

"It's only a word," Marlowe reminded him from the window. "Don't take it so seriously. Actually, there isn't any magic. Does that make you feel better?"

Ana María Rosalita looked shocked. "Oh, Marlowe! How can you say such a thing?"

"Oh, fiddle-dee-pooh! A word is a word. What's magic? Nothing but the ability to do something everybody knows is impossible. See?"

"Oh!" said the tiny girl. "But of course!"

"Only, my dear little witch, just remember that *nothing* is impossible. So, when you do things that others cannot, it merely means—"

Marlowe broke off abruptly. "*¡Quieto!*" he hissed. "People are coming!"

Their first five visitors turned out to be a group of children who used the captain's property as a shortcut to the beach. When the children were past the cottage, Ronnie crept to the corner window. Ana María Rosalita followed. They peered out between the curtains, enviously watching those outside racing along the sand, and splashing in the lazy surf.

"Oh, if we could just be out there with them!" the tiny girl whispered. "Did you ever hunt shells on a beach?"

"No. I never had the chance."

"I did it only once, when Papa came back here on a visit. I was awfully little. Later in Santo Domingo I wasn't allowed out. Papa had too many enemies." She gave a wistful sigh. "Oh, it must be wonderful to be safe—and free to go out and play like that."

Suddenly she stared at him. "Something's wrong, Boy Blue. What is it? Did you have another of those real, *real* dreams?"

"Yes."

“Tell me about it.”

“I—I can’t. Not now.” He swallowed. This dream concerned her too closely. And at the very worst of it, before he learned what happened to her, Black Luis had wakened him.

Ronnie was almost relieved when they heard Marlowe’s quick call of warning.

In the next breath they both glimpsed the man approaching from the right side of the palm grove. The man was tall and swarthy, and there was a curious grimness about him. He wore a green sport shirt, and carried an attaché case.

Ronnie studied him, and said quickly, “That has to be Pardo Green.”

12
STRATEGY

WHEN THE MAN IN THE GREEN SHIRT identified himself, Black Luis hurried down the stairway and let him in through the grilled door to the patio. Ronnie met him in the living room, gave their names, and briefly explained their predicament.

While he listened, Pardo Green slowly paced the room, his narrow eyes going searchingly from one to the other. Once he paused before Ana María Rosalita and gently touched her bruised face with the tips of his long, hard fingers. Something like an angry growl came from his throat.

"You see how it is," Ronnie said finally. "There's not only Black Luis' trouble, and the way Ana María Rosalita's been treated, but there's the fact that both of them will be taken to Santo Domingo if they are caught. And—and that will practically amount to murder."

"Murder?" questioned the lawyer. "Why?"

"Because they'll kill us," Black Luis told him. "They don't like us over there."

Pardo Green suddenly snapped his fingers. "Of course! I remember now." His voice was deep, and he spoke English without a trace of an accent. "You're the young fellow who helped Ana María Rosalita get away from there when a mob took after her. Crazy fanatics! There was quite a bit of talk about it here at the time. H'mm. No wonder Don Carlos gave you the land."

He paused, scowled, and said, "And now Bernardo wants it back. Why?"

When Ronnie explained, the lawyer exploded. "A chemical factory! God preserve us!" He wrinkled his nose.

Black Luis said quickly, "But Ana María Rosalita has put the fix to it. That's why we came here this morning. So she could talk to that *bribón* on the telephone."

Pardo Green looked sharply at the tiny girl. "What in the world did you tell your brother?"

"Bernardo is *not* my brother," she said emphatically. "He was only my half brother in the beginning, but now I am through with him. I've made Black Luis my brother. And I've also made Ron—Ron McHenry—my brother. We have no one but each other, so we've decided to be

a family. And Captain Anders has promised to be our guardian."

"But we'll have to get rid of Bernardo first, and that won't be easy. H'mm. What was it you told him on the phone this morning? I'll have to know."

"I warned him," she said, with a touch of her duchess manner, "that if he didn't leave Black Luis alone, I would give him warts."

"And did you?"

"I did," she replied in her icicle tone. "Big, ugly ones. On his face."

Pardo Green stared at her. He sat down. "Warts," he said softly. "If you said you gave them to him, I'm sure he's got them. Anyone with a mind as positive as yours …" Suddenly his grim, swarthy face cracked into a smile. All at once he slapped his knee and laughed. "That rascally peacock—with warts! How I'd like to see him now! But he won't show himself to a soul. He'll sign papers, though, to get rid of the things. And he'll hate you more than ever."

The lawyer frowned. "Unfortunately, this won't save Black Luis from being deported. If he's an alien—"

"But he's not an alien!" Ronnie interrupted. "He was born right here on the island, and that automatically makes him an American citizen. He's never changed it."

"Can you prove that, Ron?"

"I'm certain it can be proved, sir. His birth must be recorded somewhere, and surely there are people living who remember it. He was born on his own property, in the house that Bernardo burned down. Bernardo's been trying to frighten him away and take advantage of him because he's an orphan and has no one to stand up for him. And—and I think it's awfully fishy that Ana María Rosalita has no citizenship. Don't you?"

"Frankly, yes."

"I'll bet," said Ronnie, "that's just a rumor Bernardo started to cover up something. Why, I'll bet she was born before her father became a Dominican subject—if he ever did. If we checked into it—"

"Hold it," said Pardo Green. "I've a tape recorder here, and I want to take all this down." He placed his attaché case flat upon the coffee table, opened it, and pressed something inside. "Gather close. I don't want it to miss a word. But first, Ron, where do you fit in the picture?"

"I don't quite fit, sir. I'm an outsider. It just happened that each of us was in trouble, so we sort of joined forces. We all want the captain for our guardian."

"What's your trouble?"

"I—I know too much. Someone wants to kill me. But please, let's not go into that now. Did you bring a camera?"

"I brought a camera," said the lawyer, studying him curiously. "I

borrowed one. When my office told me Ana María Rosalita had been badly beaten, locked up, and starved—"

"But it wasn't quite as bad as you make it sound," the tiny girl interrupted.

"It's bad enough, and in court it's got to sound bad. That devil really swatted you. I'd like to put you in a hospital and have a doctor, but no—"

"It could be dangerous," Ronnie said instantly.

Pardo Green nodded. "It could be very dangerous. We've got a tiger by the tail. Until we can take it to court, the law's entirely on Bernardo's side. If he finds her before we're ready to fight him—and that could take weeks—"

"He'll have her in Santo Domingo before we know it."

"Then we're licked." Pardo Green was up and pacing the floor again. "I'd better tell you now that this is going to be rough. We've got to dig up facts that will take time and money. Until we have those facts, I must keep you hidden where Bernardo and the police can't find you. You can't stay here. The police are bound to come back and make an official entry."

The lawyer shook his head. "Trouble is, I can't think of a place on the island where you'd be safe. With Bernardo's means—"

Black Luis said, "We have a place. It's my cave."

"A *cave?* Good grief, son, you're not a bunch of rats!"

"But it's a wonderful spot!" said Ronnie. "It has everything—furnished rooms, a kitchen, running water.... Black Luis' grandfather hid in it for years, so it ought to be safe enough for a while."

"I know about the cave," said Ana María Rosalita, "and that is where we will hide."

Her positive tone brought a twinkle to Pardo Green's hard eyes. "I guess that settles it."

Ronnie reached for his billfold. "Now about expense money—"

"We'd better pray on that," said the lawyer. "We'll win this in time, and it will come out of Bernardo's pocket. But until then, Captain Anders has guaranteed the expenses."

"No, please, I promised to pay for everything."

"But, son, have you any conception how much money it may take to dig up the evidence we need?"

"I can make a good guess," Ronnie told him. Hurriedly he counted out most of the money in his billfold and thrust it across the table. "Here's nine thousand for a start. It won't go far if you have trouble and have to send investigators to Santo Domingo. But by the time it's gone, I'll have more."

Pardo Green looked at him in blank astonishment. "I don't get this. You're a surprising person. And what in heaven's name is a kid your

age doing with such a wad in his pocket?"

"I earned it. My—my manager gave it to me just before he was killed. He saw what was coming …"

Pardo Green continued to stare at him. Suddenly he exclaimed softly, "*¡Clavos de Cristo!* Would you be wearing a wig, and have blue hair under it?"

"Yes, sir." Ronnie glanced at the others. "They know about me. So does Captain Anders."

"Good Lord! I should have guessed sooner. Are you in danger now?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Do you realize how this complicates things?"

"Yes, sir. Everything's pretty complicated at the moment. But I believe I've figured out what to do." He chewed on his lip while he thought swiftly ahead. Wally Gramm worried him, but the biggest problem was how the three of them could get safely away from here.

He looked at the lawyer and said, "While I repeat to the tape recorder what I've already told you about Bernardo, will you phone the FBI for me? I—I want you to set up a meeting with them here tonight, about an hour after dark."

"Okay. But why so late, son?"

"To give Black Luis and Ana María Rosalita a chance to get started for the cave. We don't want the FBI to find them here and ask too many questions."

"Lord, no!"

"And you'd better remind them to bring their own tape recorder. I'll have a lot to tell them."

They had nearly finished their recording session with Pardo Green when a small sound drew Black Luis to the den. He returned swiftly.

"Those men who came earlier," he whispered to Ronnie. "They're back—with tools!"

"What's all this?" Pardo Green asked.

Ronnie hurriedly explained what had happened. "I've been expecting them back. Josip—he's the steward—is sure I'm here, alone. Wally Gramm wants to break in—"

"For what? To kill you?"

"Maybe—if he's the one who killed my manager. He pretended he came to help me, but I think he really wants to—to set me up for someone else to do the dirty work."

"There are others after you?"

"They flew out ahead of the boat and were waiting for me on the dock. Three of them. Two were the men who nearly got me in New Orleans. The third was my tutor, Peter Pushkin. He—"

"Hold it," Pardo Green whispered. "I believe our callers are coming

up the steps. Keep out of sight."

The lawyer waited until it was evident, from the sounds, that someone was trying to force the grill door. Then he swiftly unlocked the kitchen door and sprang out upon the entry porch, fuming like an angry vacationer disturbed in his siesta. His furious promise to call the *policía* sent Wally Gramm and Josip into hasty retreat, muttering apologies.

But for the threat that hung over them, Ronnie would have found it very funny. The thought of his dream filled him with a growing dread. While the others went through a final questioning, he slipped into the study to worry over his plan for the evening.

Pardo Green had called the main office of the FBI and had been told that men would be on their way from San Juan as soon as the Treasury agent could be located. "Guido—he's Guido Gonzáles—" the lawyer had said, "wants to come out himself. You've got everybody there excited. Holy Moses, I didn't know this concerned that big foreign accounts case I've been reading about!"

"I didn't either, at first," Ronnie admitted.

"Well, it looks like you're the key to the whole thing. They're even beginning to call it the Blue Boy Case."

As he slumped down on the study sofa, there was a rustling in the leaves by the window. Marlowe whispered, "Hey, brother Blue, what's the big deal for tonight?"

"The FBI is coming," Ron whispered back. "Before they get here—as soon as it's dark enough—Black Luis and Ana María Rosalita are going to leave for the cave. You—you've got to help them."

"Sure I will! What's bugging you?"

"It'll be hours before I can leave. The plan is for Pardo Green to go with me as far as the sea grape tree.

"Well? What's wrong with that? I'll scout the way."

Ronnie swallowed. "But—but I had a dream about tonight—"

"That real, *real* dream you wouldn't tell little sister?"

"Yes. Something's going to happen, because in the dream Pardo Green's not with me. I—I'm running, and men are trying to catch me. I'm carrying a small can of oil to fill the lanterns—"

"You'll find it at the foot of the stairs where the captain left it. But the men—do they catch you?"

"I—I don't know. But that's not the worst of it. Just as I reach that rocky place up the beach, I stumble and fall. And there in front of me is Ana María Rosalita's smaller bag. If something hadn't happened, it wouldn't have been dropped there. Which means something *is* going to happen there tonight."

"Ulp! I do not like that. But if there is trouble, we will squeak out of it somehow. Is there more to the dream?"

"A—a little. As I get to my feet, a man is closing in behind me. I hear you yelling, and I see another man—this one's Wally Gramm—coming around the edge of the rocks."

"Then what?"

"I don't know. That was when Black Luis shook me awake."

"*¡Madre!* That is bad. But every problem has a solution. I was with you in the dream, so I will be with you tonight. And never forget that I am a *very* clever little fellow."

The first shock of the evening came at sundown, just as they were finishing a cold supper out of cans from the pantry. It was a visit from the island police.

There were two. They went swiftly around the house, testing the grillwork, and climbed the steps to the entrance.

"*¡Policía!*" one called. "Open up!" He put his finger to the buzzer while his companion unhooked a huge ring of keys from his belt.

Ronnie was already feverishly helping Ana María Rosalita hide the evidence that more than two people had been eating here. Black Luis opened the door to the inner stairway, found the key to the patio, and ran for the tiny girl's bags.

Pardo Green whispered, "Ron, let them out below and lock up behind them. I'll stall the police."

Ronnie crept down the stairway and unlatched the bottom door. With Black Luis' key he tiptoed to the big grill door facing the beach, unlocked it, and carefully eased it open. He looked quickly around, then motioned to the others. The black boy and the tiny girl sped silently across the flagstones and slipped outside.

As she passed him, Ana María Rosalita whispered breathlessly, "We'll be waiting for you, Boy Blue!"

Sick at heart, he locked the door and watched a few seconds while they raced through the palm grove and started up the beach. It was still bright daylight. Why couldn't the police have come later?

As he turned back to the stairway, he saw the small can of oil where Marlowe had said it would be. He swallowed, wondering if he really would find them waiting at the cave.

The sound of angry voices drew him swiftly back to the living room. As he locked the upper door he heard Pardo Green in the kitchen, shouting through the window, "This is ridiculous! Search the house? For what?"

"I tell you a girl has been abducted!" a policeman shouted back. "We have orders to search—"

"A girl has been abducted? Who is she?"

"She is no less than the small sister of Bernardo Montoya!"

"*¡Madre de Dios!* Why didn't you say so in the first place?" Pardo

Green jerked open the kitchen door, rushed out, and unlocked the grill door. “Come in, gentlemen, come in! Tell me, who was foolish enough to commit such an outrage?”

“All we know is that two ruffians forcibly took her away during the night. Don Bernardo tried to stop them, but he was attacked and beaten unmercifully.”

“Poor fellow,” said Pardo Green. “I suppose he’s confined to his bed, and no visitors are allowed.”

“So we have been informed. We regret this intrusion, but every building must be searched. This is a terrible thing.”

The men went briskly through the cottage, examining everything. After asking a few questions, they left. Pardo Green looked quizzically at Ronnie. “How hard did you hit that rascal?”

“As hard as I could, but I didn’t hurt him much. And Black Luis didn’t touch him. He was carrying her bags.”

“Then it has to be warts. Oh, brother! Our little Ana María Rosalita must have done a job on him!”

Ronnie turned away, his small hands knotted in his pockets. By now Ana María Rosalita and Black Luis had reached the rocky area, and the thing that was going to happen had happened. There was nothing in the world he could do to help them.

It was exactly an hour after dark when Guido Gonzáles arrived from San Juan with two other agents, each carrying a tape recorder. Guido Gonzáles, a slender, soft-spoken man, introduced those with him as José Avilés, an assistant, and Thomas Church, from the Treasury Department.

Ronnie had rather expected the cold-eyed Treasury agent to look as he did, though sports clothes and glasses made an even greater change in the man’s appearance. But neither by a second glance nor an uncertain word did Ronnie betray the fact that he was aware of the other’s identity.

Smiling, Guido Gonzáles said, “Before Juan Pardo called, we never dreamed we’d be meeting the Blue Boy in person and have him straighten out one of the biggest tangles on record.”

“I don’t promise to solve anything,” Ronnie replied quickly. “All I can do is tell you what I know and remember.”

“But that should clinch it,” said the agent, as the others set up their tape recorders. “First, before we get started, how long have you known that Gus Woolman and Wally Gramm were mixed up in this foreign accounts thing?”

“Only during the past five weeks.”

“But you were with them more than three years,” the Treasury man said. “Surely, in all that time—”

"They were not as important as you think," Ronnie answered. "They were just temporary agents for a group of people who had money to hide, so they wouldn't be taxed. All Gus and Wally did was arrange to have it collected and delivered to foreign banks, where it went into secret accounts. I didn't know this at the time. It wasn't until I read about the secret accounts in the papers and recognized some names, that I began to figure it out."

Guido Gonzáles said, "How long did Gus and Wally act as agents?"

"Only six months. The money was hidden by then, and they had a better thing going with me as the Blue Boy."

The Treasury man, Thomas Church, asked, "How did you happen to recognize those names you mentioned?"

"Because I was the bookkeeper. That's why Gus took me out of that reformatory—so I could memorize the accounts. I didn't know what it was all about at the time. All that mattered to me was to keep out of that boys' jail, where I didn't even belong. I knew Gus was a sharpie of some kind, but he was good to me, and I did what he wanted and didn't ask questions."

Ronnie paused and said, "The accounts worried me at times, but I didn't know they were dynamite till things got bad in New Orleans. There were no written records of what thirty people did with two hundred million dollars. *I* was the only record."

The men stared at him. Guido Gonzáles whistled softly. "That's far more than we thought. But why was Woolman killed?"

"Because he tried to protect me. Can't you see? When a bunch like *those* people got scared and found out I could wreck them, something had to be done. So I'm sure they ordered Gus and Wally to do it, or else. Only, Gus refused." Ronnie swallowed. "I can't prove Wally killed Gus, but of course you can."

Thomas Church said a little doubtfully, "Are you sure you have enough facts of the kind we need? Ordinary records won't help us much. This case is involved. There are real names, false names, numbered accounts in different banks.…"

Ronnie glanced at him wearily. "I know it. I can match name for name, the number that goes with it, the code for each bank, the date and amount of each deposit, the totals for each name, and a lot more that will come when I start remembering. If you'll just let me get started …"

Names, dates, numbers, and more numbers. Names that stood for other names, and numbers and sums and mounting totals …

The tape that unwound in his mind rolled steadily until after midnight, when Pardo Green called a recess. Someone brewed a pot of coffee and served it with stale cookies from the pantry. Then the tape

began to roll again.

The end of the tape came at three in the morning.

The men looked at him in awe. José Avilés said, “What he did is impossible. But I saw him and heard him …”

Thomas Church closed his tape recorder and said to Ronnie, “I’d like to stay the rest of the night, but we’ve a plane to catch in the morning, so we’d better get on to San Juan. Where’s your bag?”

Pardo Green snapped, “You’re not taking him back to the mainland!”

“I certainly am,” said the Treasury man.

“No!” said Ronnie, shocked. “I won’t go with you! You’ve taped everything—you don’t need me in person!”

“Of course you don’t!” said Pardo Green. “Besides, he wants to stay. He’s needed here on another matter—

“Sorry. This is a Treasury case. It comes first.”

Ronnie said angrily, “You mean money comes first, above everything. But not in my book. I’m *not* going with you.”

“You have no choice,” Thomas Church reminded him.

Pardo Green said, “Have you a paper giving you legal possession of him?”

“My orders are enough. I’m taking custody of him. He’s a minor, and in danger. He’ll need protection—”

“Protection!” Ronnie cried. “What kind of protection did I get in New Orleans when you were Peter Pushkin?”

Thomas Church stiffened. “I’m surprised you recognized me. And I’m sorry about New Orleans. But at the time we had no idea you were the key to the case. Anyhow, you were foolish to run away.”

“What did you expect me to do? Stand around and be shot? Did you know that the same nice pair were waiting to greet me in San Juan? You walked right by them when you crossed the dock.”

Before Thomas Church could get over his astonishment, Ronnie turned to the inner stairway door. With his hand on the knob, he glanced knowingly at Pardo Green and said, “While I get my bag, why don’t you tell them about Wally?”

The lawyer instantly understood and began talking swiftly while Ron stepped through the opening and quietly closed the door behind him.

With his heart suddenly pounding furiously, he tiptoed down through the blackness and eased the lower door open. At the sight of the bright moonlight streaming through the patio grillwork, he paused a moment in dismay. Then he caught up the oilcan, moved to the patio door, and drew from his pocket the key he had thrust there hours before.

Slowly, carefully, he turned the key in the lock, opened the door,

and slipped through. Just as carefully he closed and locked it again.

The night was alive with the happy singing of the coquis as he began creeping through the palm grove, but the one sound he wanted to hear did not come. It was the reassurance of Marlowe's small, sharp voice. With every step away from the cottage he moved a little faster. Soon he was running.

He was almost at the upper corner of the grove when he heard a faint shout behind him. It sent him racing madly across the sand and up the narrowing beach. At this hour the moon was over the sea instead of the mountains, making the beach nearly as bright as day, and offering no protective shadows to hide him. So bright and clear was it that he could make out every detail of the rocky area ahead.

The tumbled rocks offered the first break in the low cliff that flanked this part of the beach. Once there, he had only to dart to the right and find safety in the tangles that stretched on to Black Luis' mountain. And somehow, in spite of the danger he knew awaited him, he was certain he would reach safety. His first two dreams had taught him that.

But what of Black Luis and Ana María Rosalita?

Something had already happened ahead. As his flying feet brought him closer to the rocks, he felt a sick fear of what it had been. At a sudden shout behind him he risked a quick glance over his shoulder. The man he had once known as Peter Pushkin was hardly fifty yards away, gaining rapidly.

At that instant, just as in the dream, he stumbled and went sprawling in the sand. And there, directly in front of him—as he had known it would be—was Ana María Rosalita's smaller bag.

Scrambling to his feet, he unconsciously caught up the bag in his left hand—for he still clung to the can of oil with his right—and whirled to dart into the tangle.

"No!" Marlowe screamed abruptly, from somewhere near. "The other way! To the left!"

Before Ron could turn again, he saw Wally Gramm, a very grim and determined Wally Gramm, step quickly from the shadow of the rocks with a weapon in his hand. This was where the dream had ended. Only now did he understand why Wally happened to be here at this hour. It was the bag.

In a flash he realized that Wally and Josip had seen the others leave the cottage, that Josip had recognized Ana María Rosalita and guessed she could lead them to the person they sought. They had escaped at the cost of the bag—so the bag had been watched.

All this went through his mind as he flung the oilcan into Wally's face. But even as he flung it, the man dropped his weapon and cried out hoarsely as if something had bitten him.

Whirling away, Ronnie glimpsed Thomas Church pounding close and heard Marlowe urging frantically, "*Dive under the line! Hurry! Dive!*"

If he had been looking at it directly, he would have missed it, but he saw it out of the corner of his eye—the vaguest sort of a shimmering near the water's edge, something that might have been only a drifting cobweb. All at once he knew that *this* was the route the others had been forced to take. He dove and rolled frantically under that gossamer thread of light. There was the momentary sensation of being caught between a whirlwind and a thunderclap. Then everything vanished.

Wally Gramm was unable to protest as Thomas Church slipped handcuffs over his wrists. He was a frightened man. "A ghost bit me!" he gasped.

"Don't be a fool!" Thomas Church said angrily, shaken by what he had seen but could not believe. "Where's Ronnie?"

"I don't know! He was right in front of me—and then he wasn't. Maybe that ghost—"

"There's no such thing as a ghost! Where's the boy? He *has* to be somewhere!"

"I'll tell you where," Wally Gramm muttered. "He's still nine jumps ahead of everybody, like he always has been. And don't talk to me about ghosts. I was bitten by one. I left that fool Josip here to keep watch, but it scared him away. Me, I don't scare easy—but when a voice yells at you out of nowhere, and then bites you.…"

Very near them, if the distance could have been measured, but an immeasurable space away except by Prynne's mathematics, Ronnie got to his feet and looked slowly around with a mixture of growing wonder and delight.

Dr. Prynne had mentioned that conditions here probably would be opposite, and obviously they were. It had been after three in the morning when he left the other beach, and here it seemed about that time in the afternoon. The sea, which had been on his left, was now on the right. As for people …

There were none. The race of man hadn't evolved here yet. He was aware of that instantly by the cleanliness of the beach and the untouched look of everything. Black Luis had said this was a lonesome place, but that was because Black Luis had been the only human here that first time.

It wasn't lonesome now. Ronnie saw the footprints leading across the sand to the trees. "Hey, where's everybody?" he called happily.

"Probably stuffing themselves on mangoes," said Marlowe from somewhere behind him. "Follow the tracks, brother Blue, and I'll show

you the camp. And *don't* turn around, for I'm terribly exposed here."

"But isn't it about time we—"

"No!" Marlowe shrieked. "Don't you *dare* look back! Or haven't you learned that ghosts can bite?"

About the Author

Alexander Key (1904–1979) started out as an illustrator before he began writing science fiction novels for young readers. He has published many titles, including *Sprockets*: *A Little Robot, Mystery of the Sassafras Chair*, and *The Forgotten Door*, winner of the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award. Key's novel *Escape to Witch Mountain* was adapted for film in 1975, 1995, and 2009.

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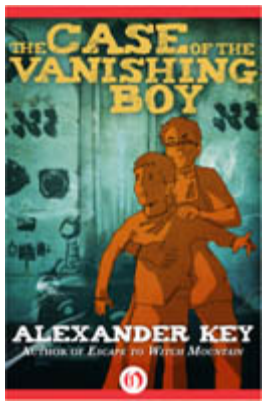

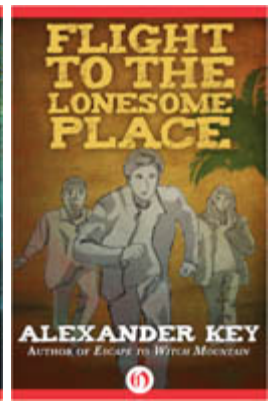

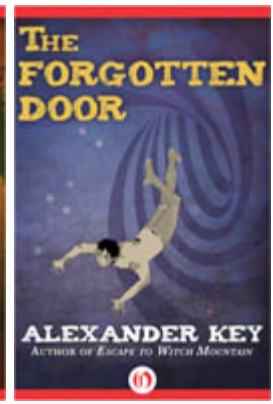

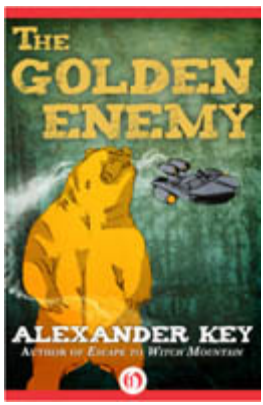

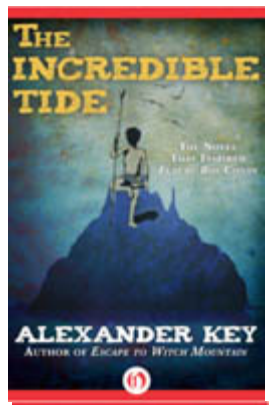

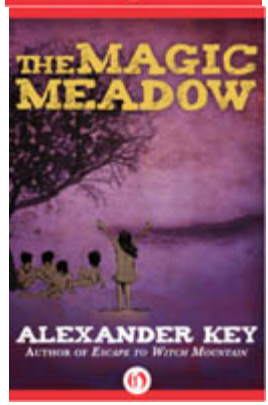

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